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[See p. 12

AS muddy waters purify themselves in running, so had the Knight blood, coming through unpleasant channels, finally clarified and sweetened itself in this girl.

THE AUCTION BLOCK

By REX BEACH

Author of "THE SILVER HORDE"
"THE SPOILERS" "THE IRON TRAIL" Etc.

Illustrated

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THE AUCTION BLOCK

THE AUCTION BLOCK

CHAPTER I

PETER KNIGHT flung himself into the decrepit arm-chair beside the center-table and growled:

"Isn't that just my luck? And me a Democrat for twenty years. There's nothing in politics, Jimmy."

His son James smiled crookedly, with a languid tolerance bespeaking amusement and contempt. James prided himself upon his forbearance, and it was rarely indeed that he betrayed more than a hint of the superiority which he felt toward his parent.

"Politics is all right, provided you're a good picker," he said, with all the assurance of twenty-two, "but you fell off the wrong side of the fence, and you're sore."

"Of course I am. Wouldn't anybody be sore?"

"These country towns always go in for the reform stuff, every so often. If you'd listen to me and—"

His father interrupted harshly: "Now, cut that out. I don't want to go to New York, and I won't." Peter Knight tried to look forceful, but the expression did not fit his weak, complacent features. He was a plump man with red cheeks rounded by habitual good humor; his chin was short, and beneath it were other chins, distended and sagging as if from the weight of chuckles within. When he had succeeded in fixing a look of determination upon his countenance the result was an artificial scowl

and a palpably false pout. Wearing such a front, he continued: "When I say 'no' I mean it, and the subject is closed. I like Vale, I know everybody here, and everybody knows me."

"That's why it's time to move," said Jim, with another unpleasant curl of his lip. "As long as they didn't know you you got past. But you'll never hold another office."

"Indeed! My record's open to inspection. I made the best sheriff in—"

"Two years. Don't kid yourself, pa. Your foot slipped when the trolley line went through."

"What do you know about the trolley line?" angrily demanded Mr. Knight.

"Well, I know as much as the county knows. And I know something about the big dam, too. You got into the mud, pa, but you didn't go deep enough to find the frogs. Fogarty got his, didn't he?"

Mr. Knight breathed deep with indignation.

"Senator Fogarty is my good friend. I won't let you question his honor, although you do presume to question mine."

"Of course he's your friend; that's why he's fixed you for this New York job. He's not like these Reubs; he remembers a good turn and blows back with another. He's a real politician."

"'Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity,'" sneered Peter. "It sounds good, but the salary is fifteen hundred a year. A clerk—at my age!"

"Say, d'you suppose Tammany men live on their salaries?" Jimmy inquired. "Wake up! This is your chance to horn into the real herd. In New York politics is a vocation; up here it's a vacation—everybody tries it once, like music lessons. If you'd been hooked up with Tammany instead of the state machine you'd have been taken care of."

"I tell you I don't like cities. It's no place to raise kids."

At this James betrayed some irritation. "I'm of age, and Lorelei's a grown woman. If we don't get out of Vale I'll still be a brakeman on a soda-fountain when I'm your age."

"If you'd worked hard you'd have had an interest in the drug store now."

"Rats!"

At this juncture Mrs. Knight, having finished the supper dishes and set her bread to rise, entered the shoddy parlor. Jim turned to her, shrugging his shoulders with an air of washing his hands of a disagreeable subject. "Pa's weakened again," he explained. "He won't go."

"Me, a clerk—at my age!" mumbled Peter.

"I've been trying to tell him that he'd get a half-Nelson on Tammany inside of a year. He squeezed the sheriff's office till it squealed, and if he can pinch a dollar out of this burg he can—"

"You shut up! I don't like your way of saying things," snarled Mr. Knight.

His wife spoke for the first time, with brief conclusiveness.

"I wrote and thanked Senator Fogarty for his offer and told him you'd accept."

"You—what?" Peter was dumfounded.

"Yes"—Mrs. Knight seemed oblivious of his wrath—"we're going to make a change."

Mrs. Knight was a large woman well advanced beyond that indefinite turning-point of middle age; in her unattractive face was none of the easy good nature so unmistakably stamped upon her husband's. Peter J. was inherently optimistic; his head was forever hidden in a roseate aura of hopefulness and expectation. Under easy living he had grayed and fattened; his eyes were small and colorless, his cheeks full and veined with tiny sprays

of purple, his hands soft and limber. What had once been a measure of good looks was hidden now behind a flabby, indefinite mediocrity which an unusual carefulness in dress could not disguise. He was big-hearted in little things; in big things he was small. He told an excellent story, but never imagined one, and his laugh was hearty though insincere. Men who knew him well laughed with him, but did not indorse his notes.

His wife was of a totally different stamp, showing evidence of unusual force. Her thin lips, her clean-cut nose betokened purpose; a pair of alert, unpleasant eyes spoke of a mental activity that was entirely lacking in her mate, and she was generally recognized as the source of what little prominence he had attained.

"Yes, we're going to make a change," she repeated. "I'm glad, too, for I'm tired of housework."

"You don't have to do your own work. There's Lorelei to help."

"You know I wouldn't let her do it."

"Afraid it would spoil her hands, eh?" Mr. Knight snorted, disdainfully. "What are hands made for, anyhow? Honest work never hurt mine."

Jim stirred and smiled; the retort upon his lips was only too obvious.

"She's too pretty," said the mother. "You don't realize it; none of us do, but—she's beautiful. Where she gets her good looks from I don't know."

"What's the difference? It won't hurt her to wash dishes. She wouldn't have to keep it up forever, anyhow; she can have any fellow in the county."

"Yes, and she'll marry, sure, if we stay here."

Knight's colorless eyes opened. "Then what are you talking about going away to a strange place for? It ain't every girl that can have her pick."

Mrs. Knight began slowly, musingly: "You need some plain talk, Peter. I don't often tell you just what I

think, but I'm going to now. You're past fifty; you've spent twenty years puttering around at politics, with business as a side issue, and what have you got to show for it? Nothing. The reformers are in at last, and you're out for good. You had your chance and you missed it. You were always expecting something big, some fat office with big profits, but it never came. Do you know why? Because *you* aren't big, that's why. You're little, Peter; you know it, and so does the party."

The object of this address swelled pompously; his cheeks deepened in hue and distended; but while he was summoning words for a defense his wife ran on evenly:

"The party used you just as long as you could deliver something, but you're down and out now, and they've thrown you over. Fogarty offers to pay his debt, and I'm not going to refuse his help."

"I suppose you think you could have done better if you'd been in my place," Peter grumbled. He was angry, yet the undeniable truth of his wife's words struck home. "That's the woman of it. You kick because we're poor, and then want me to take a fifteen-hundred-dollar job."

"Bother the salary! It will keep us going as long as necessary."

"Eh?" Mr. Knight looked blank.

"I'm thinking of Lorelei. She's going to give us our chance."

"Lorelei?"

"Yes. You wonder why I've never let her spoil her hands—why I've scrimped to give her pretty clothes, and taught her to take care of her figure, and made her go out with young people. Well, I knew what I was doing; it was part of her schooling. She's old enough now; and she has everything that any girl ever had, so far as looks go. She's going to do for us what you never have been and never will be able to do, Peter Knight. She's going to make us rich. But she can't do it in Vale."

"Ma's right," declared James. "New York's the place for pretty women; the town is full of them."

"If it's full of pretty women what chance has she got?" queried Peter. "She can't break into society on my fifteen hundred—"

"She won't need to. She can go on the stage."

"Good Lord! What makes you think she can act?"

"Do you remember that Miss Donald who stopped at Myrtle Lodge last summer? She's an actress."

"No!" Mr. Knight was amazed.

"She told me a good deal about the show business. She said Lorelei wouldn't have the least bit of trouble getting a position. She gave me a note to a manager, too, and I sent him Lorelei's photograph. He wrote right back that he'd give her a place."

"Really?"

"Yes; he's looking for pretty girls with good figures. His name is Bergman."

Jim broke in eagerly. "You've heard of Bergman's Revues, pa. We saw one last summer, remember? Bergman's a big fellow."

"*That* show? Why, that was—rotten. It isn't a very decent life, either."

"Don't worry about Sis," advised Jim. "She can take care of herself, and she'll grab a millionaire sure—with her looks. Other girls are doing it every day—why not her? Ma's got the right idea."

Impassively Mrs. Knight resumed her argument. "New York is where the money is—and the women that go with money. It's the market-place. The stage advertises a pretty girl and gives her chances to meet rich men. Here in Vale there's nobody with money, and, besides, people know us. The Stevens girls have been nasty to Lorelei all winter, and she's never invited to the golf-club dances any more."

At this intelligence Mr. Knight burst forth indignantly.

"I wrote and thanked Senator Fogarty

or his offer and told him you'd accept."

"They're putting on a lot of airs since the Interurban went through; but Ben Stevens forgets who helped him get the franchise. I could tell a lot of things—"

"Bergman writes," continued Mrs. Knight, "that Lorelei wouldn't have to go on the road at all if she didn't care to. The real pretty show-girls stay right in New York."

Jim added another word. "She's the best asset we've got, pa, and if we all work together we'll land her in the money, sure."

Peter Knight pinched his full red lips into a pucker and stared speculatively at his wife. It was not often that she openly showed her hand to him.

"It seems like an awful long chance," he said.

"Not so long, perhaps, as you think," his wife assured him. "Anyhow, it's our *only* chance, and we're not popular in Vale."

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"A little. She'll do anything we ask. She's a good girl that way."

The three were still buried in discussion when Lorelei appeared at the door.

"I'm going over to Mabel's," she paused a moment to say. "I'll be back early, mother."

In Peter Knight's eyes, as he gazed at his daughter, there was something akin to shame; but Jim evinced only a hard, calculating appraisal. Both men inwardly acknowledged that the mother had spoken less than half the truth, for the girl was extravagantly, bewitchingly attractive. Her face and form would have been noticeable anywhere and under any circumstances; but now in contrast with the unmodified homeliness of her parents and brother her comeliness was almost startling. The others seemed to harmonize with their drab surroundings, with the dull, unattractive house and its furnishings, but Lorelei was in violent opposition to everything about her.

She wore her beauty unconsciously, too, as a princess wears the purple of her rank. Neither in speech nor in look did she show a trace of her father's fatuous commonplaceness, and she gave no sign of her mother's coldly calculating disposition. Equally the girl differed from her brother, for Jim was anemic, underdeveloped, sallow; his only mark of distinction being his bright and impudent eye, while she was full-blooded, healthy, and clean. Splendidly distinctive, from her crown of warm amber hair to her shapely, slender feet, it seemed that all the hopes, all the aspirations, all the longings of bygone generations of Knights had flowered in her. As muddy waters purify themselves in running, so had the Knight blood, coming through unpleasant channels, finally clarified and sweetened itself in this girl. In the color of her eyes she resembled neither parent; Mrs. Knight's were close-set and hard; Peter's shallow, indefinite, weak. Lorelei's were limpid and of a twilight blue. Her single paternal inheritance was a smile perhaps a trifle too ready and too meaningless. Yet it was a pleasant smile, indicative of a disposition toward courtesy, if not self-depreciation.

But there all resemblance ceased. Lorelei Knight was mysteriously different from her kin; she might almost have sprung from a different strain, and except as one of those "throwbacks" which sometimes occur in a mediocre family, when an exotic offspring blooms like a delicate blossom in a bed of weeds, she was inexplicable. Simple living had made her strong, yet she remained exquisite; behind a natural and a deep reserve she was vibrant with youth and spirits.

In the doorway she hesitated an instant, favoring the group with her shadowy, impersonal smile. In her gaze there was a faint inquiry, for it was plain that she had interrupted a serious discussion. She came forward and rested a hand upon her father's thinly haired bullet-

head. Peter reached up and took it in his own moist palm.

"We were just talking about you," he said.

"Yes?" The smile remained as the girl's touch lingered.

"Your ma thinks I'd better accept that New York offer on your account."

"On mine? I don't understand."

Peter stroked the hand in his clasp, and his weak, upturned face was wrinkled with apprehension. "She thinks you should see the world and—make something of yourself."

"That would be nice." Lorelei's lips were still parted as she turned toward her mother in some bewilderment.

"You'd like the city, wouldn't you?" Mrs. Knight inquired.

"Why, yes; I suppose so."

"We're poor—poorer than we've ever been. Jim will have to work, and so will you."

"I'll do what I can, of course; but—I don't know how to do anything. I'm afraid I won't be much help at first."

"We'll see to that. Now, run along, dearie."

When she had gone Peter gave a grunt of conviction.

"She *is* pretty," he acknowledged; "pretty as a picture, and you certainly dress her well. She'd ought to make a good actress."

Jim echoed him enthusiastically. "Pretty? I'll bet Bernhardt's got nothing on her for looks. She'll have a brownstone hut on Fifth Avenue and an air-tight limousine one of these days, see if she don't."

"When do you plan to leave?" faltered the father.

Mrs. Knight answered with some satisfaction: "Rehearsals commence in May."

CHAPTER II

MR. CAMBELL POPE was a cynic. He had cultivated a superb contempt for those beliefs which other people cherish; he rejoiced in an open rebellion against convention, and manifested this hostility in an exaggerated carelessness of dress and manner. It was perhaps his habit of thought as much as anything else that had made him a dramatic critic; but it was a knack for keen analysis and a natural, caustic wit that had raised him to eminence in his field. Outwardly he was a sloven and a misanthrope; inwardly he was simple and rather boyish, but years of experience in a box-office, then as advance man and publicity agent for a circus, and finally as a Metropolitan reviewer, had destroyed his illusions and soured his taste for theatrical life. His column was widely read; his name was known; as a prophet he was uncanny, hence managers treated him with a gingerly courtesy not always quite sincere.

Most men attain success through love of their work; Mr. Pope had become an eminent critic because of his hatred for the drama and all things dramatic. Nor was he any more enamoured of journalism, being in truth by nature bucolic, but after trying many occupations and failing in all of them he had returned to his desk after each excursion into other fields. First-night audiences knew him now, and had come to look for his thin, sharp features. His shapeless, wrinkled suit that resembled a sleeping-bag; his flannel shirt, always tieless and frequently collarless, were considered attributes of genius; and,

finding New York to be amazingly gullible, he took a certain delight in accentuating his eccentricities. At especially prominent premières he affected a sweater underneath his coat, but that was his nearest approach to formal evening dress. Further concession to fashion he made none.

Owing to the dearth of new productions this summer, Pope had undertaken a series of magazine articles descriptive of the reigning theatrical beauties, and, while he detested women in general and the painted favorites of Broadway in particular, he had forced himself to write the common laudatory stuff which the public demanded. Only once had he given free rein to his inclinations and written with a poisoned pen. To-night, however, as he entered the stage door of Bergman's Circuit Theater, it was with a different intent.

Regan, the stage-door tender, better known since his vaudeville days as "The Judge," answered his greeting with a lugubrious shake of a bald head.

"I'm a sick man, Mr. Pope. Same old trouble."

"M-m-m. Kidneys, isn't it?"

"No. Rheumatism. I'm a beehive swarmin' with pains."

"To be sure. It's Hemphill, the door-man at the Columbus, who has the floating kidney. I paid for his operation."

"Hemphill. Operation! Ha!" The Judge cackled in a voice hoarse from alcoholic excesses. "He bilked you, Mr. Pope. He's the guy that put the kid in kidney. There's nothing wrong with him. He could do his old acrobatic turn if he wanted to."

"I remember the act."

"Me an' Greenberg played the same bill with him twenty years ago." The Judge leaned forward, and a strong odor of whisky enveloped the caller. "Could you slip me four bits for some liniment?"

The critic smiled. "There's a dollar, Regan. Try Scotch for a change. It's better for you than these cheap blends. And don't breathe toward a lamp, or you'll ignite."

The Judge laughed wheezingly. "I do take a drop now and then."

"A drop? You'd better take a tumble, or Bergman will let you out."

"See here, you know all the managers, Mr. Pope. Can't you find a job for a swell dame?" the Judge inquired, anxiously.

"Who is she?"

"Lottie Devine. She's out with the 'Peach Blossom Girls.'"

"Lottie Devine. Why, she's your wife, isn't she?"

"Sure, and playing the 'Wheel' when she belongs in musical comedy. She dances as good as she did when we worked together—after she gets warmed up—and she looks great in tights—swellest legs in burlesque, Mr. Pope. Can't you place her?"

"She's a trifle old, I'm afraid."

"Huh! She wigs up a lot better'n some of the squabs in this troupe. Believe me, she'd fit any chorus."

"Why don't you ask Bergman?"

Mr. Regan shook his hairless head. "He's dippy on 'types.' This show's full of 'em: real blondes, real brunettes, bold and dashin' ones, tall and statelies, blushers, shrinkers, laughers, and sadlings. He won't stand for make-up; he wants 'em with the dew on. They've got to look natural for Bergman. That's some of 'em now." He nodded toward a group of young, fresh-cheeked girls who had entered the stage door and were hurrying down the hall. "There ain't a Hepnerized ensemble in the whole first act, and they wear talcum powder instead of tights. It's dimples he wants, not 'fats.' How them girls stand the draught I don't know. It would kill an old-timer."

"I've come to interview one of Bergman's 'types'; that new beauty, Miss Knight. Is she here yet?"

"Sure; her and the back-drop, too. She carries the old woman for scenery." Mr. Regan took the caller's card and shuffled away, leaving Pope to watch the stream of performers as they entered and made for their quarters. There were many women in the number, and all of them were pretty. Most of them were overdressed in the extremes of fashion; a few quietly garbed ladies and gentlemen entered the lower dressing-rooms reserved for the principals.

It was no novel sight to the reviewer, whose theatrical apprenticeship had been thorough, yet it never failed to awaken his deepest cynicism. Somewhere within him was a puritanical streak, and he still cherished youthful memories. He reflected now that it was he who had laid the foundation for the popularity of the girl he had come to interview; for he had picked her out of the chorus of the preceding Revue and commented so enthusiastically upon her beauty that this season had witnessed her advancement to a speaking part. Through Pope's column attention had been focused upon Bergman's latest acquisition; and once New York had paused to look carefully at this fresh young new-comer, her fame had spread. But he had never met the girl herself, and he wondered idly what effect success had had upon her. A total absence of scandal had argued against any previous theatrical experience.

Meanwhile he exchanged greetings with the star—a clear-eyed man with the face of a scholar and the limbs of an athlete. The latter had studied for the law; he had the drollest legs in the business, and his salary exceeded that of Supreme Court Justice. They were talking when Mr. Regan returned to tell the interviewer that he would be received.

Pope followed to the next floor and entered a brightly

lighted, overheated dressing-room, where Lorelei and her mother were waiting. It was a glaring, stuffy cubby-hole ventilated by means of the hall door and a tiny window opening from the lavatory at the rear. Along the sides ran mirrors, beneath which was fixed a wide make-up shelf. From the ceiling depended several unshaded incandescent globes which flooded the place with a desert heat and radiance. An attempt had been made to give the room at least a semblance of coolness by hanging an attractively figured cretonne over the entrance and over the wardrobe hooks fixed in the rear wall; but the result was hardly successful. The same material had been utilized to cover the shelves which were littered with a bewildering assortment of make-up tins, cold-cream cans, rouge and powder boxes, whitening bottles, wig-blocks, and the multifarious disordered accumulations of a dressing-room. The walls were half hidden behind photographs, impaled upon pins, like entomological specimens; photographs were thrust into the mirror frames, they were propped against the heaps of tins and boxes or hidden beneath the confusion of toilet articles. But the collection was not limited to this variety of specimen. One section of the wall was devoted to telegraph and cable forms, bearing messages of felicitation at the opening of "The Revue of 1913." A zoologist would have found the display uninteresting; but a society reporter would have reveled in the names—and especially in the sentiments—inscribed upon the yellow sheets. Some were addressed to Lorelei Knight, others to Lilas Lynn, her roommate.

Pope found Lorelei completely dressed, in expectation of his arrival. She wore the white and silver first-act costume of the Fairy Princess. Both she and her mother were plainly nonplussed at the appearance of their caller; but Mrs. Knight recovered quickly from the shock and said agreeably:

"Lorelei was frightened to death at your message yesterday. She was almost afraid to let you interview her after what you wrote about Adorée Demorest."

Pope shrugged. "Your daughter is altogether different to the star of the Palace Garden, Mrs. Knight. Demorest trades openly upon her notoriety and—I don't like bad women. New York never would have taken her up if she hadn't been advertised as the wickedest woman in Europe, for she can neither act, sing, nor dance. However, she's become the rage, so I had to include her in my series of articles. Now, Miss Knight has made a legitimate success as far as she has gone."

He turned to the girl herself, who was smiling at him as she had smiled since his entrance. He did not wonder at the prominence her beauty had brought her, for even at this close range her make-up could not disguise her loveliness. The lily had been painted, to be sure, but the sacrilege was not too noticeable; and he knew that the cheeks beneath their rouge were faintly colored, that the lashes under the heavy beading were long and dark and sweeping. As for her other features, no paint could conceal their perfection. Her forehead was linelessly serene, her brows were straight and too well-defined to need the pencil. As for her eyes, too much had been written about them already; they had proven the despair of many men, or so rumor had it. He saw that they had depths and shadows and glints of color that he could not readily define. Her nose, pronounced perfect by experts on noses, seemed faultless indeed. Her mouth was no tiny cupid's bow, but generous enough for character. Of course, the lips were glaringly red now, but the expression was none the less sweet and friendly.

"There's nothing 'legitimate' about musical shows," she told him, in reply to his last remark, "and I can't act or sing or dance as well as Miss Demorest."

"You don't need to; just let the public rest its eyes

on you and it will be satisfied—anyhow, it should be. Of course, everybody flatters you. Has success turned your head?"

Mrs. Knight answered for her daughter. "Lorelei has too much sense for that. She succeeded easily, but she isn't spoiled."

Then, in response to a question by Pope, Lorelei told him something of her experience. "We're up-state people, you know. Mr. Bergman was looking for types, and I seemed to suit, so I got an engagement at once. The newspapers began to mention me, and when he produced this show he had the part of the Fairy Princess written in for me. It's really very easy, and I don't do much except wear the gowns and speak a few lines."

"You're one of the principals," her mother said, chidingly.

"I suppose you're ambitious?" Pope put in.

Again the mother answered. "Indeed she is, and she's bound to succeed. Of course, she hasn't had any experience to speak of, but there's more than one manager that's got his eye on her." The listener inwardly cringed. "She could be starred easy, and she will be, too, in another season."

"Then you must be studying hard, Miss Knight?"

Lorelei shook her head.

"Not even voice culture?"

"No."

"Nor dancing? Nor acting?"

"No."

"She has so little time. You've no idea how popular she is," twittered Mrs. Knight.

Pope fancied the girl herself flushed under his inquiring eye; at any rate, her gaze wavered and she seemed vexed by her mother's explanation. He, too, resented Mrs. Knight's share in the conversation. He did not like the elder woman's face, nor her voice, nor her manner.

She impressed him as another theatrical type with which he was familiar—the stage mama. He found himself marveling at the dissimilarity of the two women.

"Of course, a famous beauty does meet a lot of people," he said. "Tell me what you think of our flourishing little city and our New York men."

But Lorelei raised a slender hand.

"Not for worlds. Besides, you're making fun of me now. I was afraid to see you, and I'd feel terribly if you printed anything I really told you. Good interviewers never do that. They come and talk about nothing, then go away and put the most brilliant things into your mouth. You are considered a very dangerous person, Mr. Pope."

"You're thinking of my story about that Demorest woman again," he laughed.

"Is she really as bad as you described her?"

"I don't know, never having met the lady. I wouldn't humiliate myself by a personal interview, so I built a story on the Broadway gossip. Inasmuch as she goes in for notoriety, I gave her some of the best I had in stock. Her photographer did the rest."

The door curtains parted, and Lilas Lynn, a slim, black-eyed young woman, entered. She greeted Pope cordially as she removed her hat and handed it to the woman who acted as dresser for the two occupants of the room.

"I'm late, as usual," she said. "But don't leave on my account." She disappeared into the lavatory, and emerged a moment later in a combing-jacket; seating herself before her own mirrors, she dove into a cosmetic can and vigorously applied a priming coat to her features, while the dresser drew her hair back and secured it tightly with a wig-band. "Lorelei's got her nerve to talk to you after the panning you gave Demorest," she continued. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself to strike a defenseless star?"

Pope nodded. "I am, and I'm ashamed of my entire sex when I hear of them flocking to the Palace Garden just to see a woman who has nothing to distinguish her but a reputation for vileness."

"Did you see the crown jewels—the King's Cabachon rubies?" Lorelei asked.

"Only from the front. I dare say they're as counterfeit as she is."

Miss Lynn turned, revealing a countenance as shiny as that of an Eskimo belle. With her war-paint only half applied and her hair secured closely to her small head, she did not in the least resemble the dashing "Countess" of the program.

"Oh, they're real enough. I got that straight."

Campbell Pope scoffed.

"Isn't it true about the King of Seldovia? Didn't she wreck his throne?" eagerly queried Mrs. Knight.

"I never met the King, and I haven't examined his throne. But, you know, kings can do no wrong, and thrones are easily mended."

But Mrs. Knight was insistent; her eyes glittered, her sharp nose was thrust forward inquisitively. "They say she draws two thousand a week, and won't go to supper with a man for less than five hundred dollars. She says if fellows want to be seen in public with her they'll have to pay for it, and she's right. Of course, she's terribly bad, but you must admit she's done mighty well for herself."

"We'll have a chance to see her to-night," announced Lilas. "Mr. Hammon is giving a big supper to some of his friends and we're going—Lorelei and I. Demorest is down for her 'Danse de Nuit.' They say it's the limit."

"Hammon, the steel man?" queried the critic, curiously.

"Sure. There's only one Hammon. But nix on the newspaper story; this is a private affair."

"Never let us speak ill of a poor Pittsburg millionaire," laughed Pope. "Scandal must never darken the soot of that village." He turned as Slosson, the press-agent of the show, entered with a bundle of photographs.

"Here are the new pictures of Lorelei for your story, old man," Mr. Slosson said. "Bergman will appreciate the boost for one of his girls. Help yourself to those you want. If you need any more stuff I'll supply it. Blushing country lass just out of the alfalfa belt—first appearance on any stage—instantaneous hit, and a record for pulchritude in an aggregation where the homeliest member is a Helen of Troy. Every appearance a riot; stage-door Johns standing on their heads; members of our best families dying to lead her to the altar; under five-year contract with Bergman, and refuses to marry until the time's up. Delancey Page, the artist, wants to paint her, and says she's the perfect American type at last. Say, Bergman can certainly pick 'em, can't he? I'll frame it for a special cop at the back door, detailed to hold off the matrimony squad of society youths, if you can use it."

"Don't go to the trouble," Pope hastily deprecated. "I know the story. Now I'm going to leave and let Miss Lynn dress."

"Don't go on my account," urged Lilas. "This room is like a subway station, and I've got so I could 'change' in Bryant Park at noon and never shock a policeman."

"You won't say anything mean about us, will you?" Mrs. Knight implored. "In this business a girl's reputation is all she has."

"I promise." Pope held out his hand to Lorelei, and as she took it her lips parted in her ever-ready smile.

"Nice girl, that," the critic remarked, as he and Slosson descended the stairs.

"Which one—Lorelei, Lilas, or the female gorilla?"

"How did she come to choose *that* for a mother?" muttered Pope

"One of Nature's inscrutable mysteries. But wait. Have you seen brother Jim?"

"No. Who's he?"

"His mother's son. Need we say more? He's a great help to the family, for he keeps 'em from getting too proud over Lorelei. He sells introductions to his sister."

Campbell Pope's exclamation was lost in a babble of voices as a bevy of "Swimming Girls" descended from the enchanted regions above and scurried out upon the stage. Through the double curtain the orchestra could be faintly heard; a voice was crying, "Places."

"Some Soul Kissers with this troupe, eh?" remarked Slosson, when the scampering figures had disappeared.

"Yes. Bergman has made a fortune out of this kind of show. He's a friend to the 'Tired Business Man.'"

"Speaking of the weary Wall Street workers, there will be a dozen of our ribbon-winners at that Hammon supper to-night. Twelve 'Bergman Beauties.' Twelve; count 'em! Any time you want to pull off a classy party for some of your bachelor friends let me know, and I'll supply the dames—at one hundred dollars a head—and guarantee their manners. They're all trained to terrapin, and know how to pick the proper forks."

"One hundred? Last season a girl was lucky to get fifty dollars as a banquet favor; but the cost of living rises nightly. No wonder Hammon's against the income tax."

"Yes, and that's exclusive of the regulation favors. There's a good story in this party if you could get the men's names."

Pope's thin lip curled, and he shook his head.

"I write theatrical stuff," he said, shortly, "because I have to, not because I like to. I try to keep it reasonably clean."

Slosson was instantly apologetic. "Oh, I don't mean there's anything wrong about this affair. Hammon is

entertaining a crowd of other steel men, and a stag supper is either dull or devilish, so he has invited a good-looking partner for each male guest. It 'll be thoroughly refined, and it's being done every night."

"I know it is. Tell me, is Lorelei Knight a regular—er—frequenter of these affairs?"

"Sure. It's part of the graft."

"I see."

"She has to piece out her salary like the other girls. Why, her whole family is around her neck—mother, brother, and father. Old man Knight was run over by a taxi-cab last summer. It didn't hurt the machine, but he's got a broken back, or something. Too bad it wasn't brother Jimmy. You must meet him, by the way. I never heard of Lorelei's doing anything really—bad."

For the moment Campbell Pope made no reply. Meanwhile a great wave of singing flooded the regions at the back of the theater as the curtain rose and the chorus broke into sudden sound. When he did speak it was with unusual bitterness.

"It's the rottenest business in the world, Slosson. Two years ago she was a country girl; now she's a Broadway belle. How long will she last, d'you think?"

"She's too beautiful to last long," agreed the press-agent, soberly, "especially now that the wolves are on her trail. But her danger isn't so much from the people she meets with as the people she eats with. That family of hers would drive any girl to the limit. They intend to cash in on her; the mother says so."

"And they will, too. She can have her choice of the wealthy rounders."

"Don't get me wrong," Slosson hastened to qualify. "She's square; understand?"

"Of course; 'object, matrimony.' It's the old story, and her mother will see to the ring and the orange blossoms. But what's the difference, after all, Slosson? It 'll

be hell for her, and a sale to the highest bidder, either way."

"Queer little gink," the press-agent reflected, as he returned to the front of the house. "I wish he wore stiff collars; I'd like to take him home for dinner."

As Pope passed out through the stage door the Judge called hoarsely after him:

"You'll keep your eye skinned for a job for Lottie, won't you? Remember, the swellest legs in burlesque."

CHAPTER III

IN his summary of Lorelei's present life Slosson had not been far wrong. Many changes had come to the Knights during the past two years—changes of habit, of thought, and of outlook; the entire family had found it necessary to alter their system of living. But it was in the girl that the changes showed most. When Mrs. Knight had forecast an immediate success for her daughter she had spoken with the wisdom of a Cassandra. Bergman had taken one look at Lorelei upon their first meeting, then his glance had quickened. She had proved to have at least an average singing-voice; her figure needed no comment. Her inexperience had been the strongest argument in her favor, since Bergman's shows were famous for their new faces. The result was that he signed her promptly, and mother and daughter had walked out of his office quite unconscious of having accomplished the unusual. At first the city had seemed strange and bewildering, and Lorelei had suffered pangs at the memory of Vale, for at her age the roots of association strike deep; but in a short time the novelty of her new life proved an anodyne and deadened acute regrets, while the vague hazard of it all kept her at an agreeable pitch of excitement.

Moreover, she took naturally to the work, finding it more like play; and, being quite free from girlish timidity, she felt no stage-fright, even upon her first appearance. Her recognition had followed quickly—it was impossible to hide such perfection of loveliness as hers—and the

publicity pleased her. In due course rival managers began to make offers, which Mrs. Knight, rising nobly to the first test of her business ability, used as levers to raise her daughter's salary and to pry out of Bergman a five-year contract. The rôle of the Fairy Princess was a result.

Thus it was that without conscious effort, without even a proof of merit beyond her appearance, Lorelei had arrived at the point where further advancement depended upon study and hard work; but, since these formed no part of the family program, she remained idle while Mrs. Knight and Jim arranged so many demands upon her time that she had no leisure for serious endeavors, even had she desired it. Proficiency in stage-craft of any sort comes only at the expense of peonage, and this girl was being groomed solely for matrimony.

The principals who topped the Bergman bill were artists—men and women who had climbed through years of patient effort; toward their subordinates they maintained an aloofness that is peculiar to the show business. They moved in a world apart from the chorus: the two classes impinged briefly eight times a week, but outside the theater they never saw each other. Even Labaudie, the doll-like danseuse, looked down upon Lorelei and Lilas almost as she looked down upon the members of her ballet. Out of all the big company there were perhaps a half-dozen chorus men and women who had eyes definitely fixed upon a stage career; the rest, like Lorelei and Lilas, regarded the work simply as an easy means of livelihood.

The theatrical profession is peculiar to itself. It is a world with customs, habits, and ambitions differing from those of any other sphere. That division of stage life to which Lorelei Knight belonged—that army of men and women from shows like Bergman's—constitutes a still more distinctive community—a community, moreover,

that is characteristic of New York alone. Its code is of its own making; its habits of life are as individual as its figures of speech. Although at first all this bewildered the country girl, at length she had come to adopt the new ways as a matter of course. From the association she had learned much. She had learned how to reap the fruits of popularity, how to take without giving, how to profit without sacrifice; and under her mother's influence she was not allowed to forget what she had learned.

With the support of the family entirely upon her shoulders, she had been driven to many shifts in order to stretch her salary to livable proportions. Peter was a total burden, and Jim either refused or was unable to contribute toward the common fund, while the mother devoted her time almost solely to managing Lorelei's affairs. Presents were showered upon the girl, and these Mrs. Knight converted into cash. Conspicuous stage characters are always welcome at the prominent cafés; hence Lorelei never had to pay for food or drink when alone, and when escorted she received a commission on the money spent. She was well paid for posing: advertisements of toilet articles, face creams, dentifrices, and the like, especially if accompanied by testimonials, yielded something. In the commercial exploitation of her daughter Mrs. Knight developed something like genius. She arranged for paid interviews and special beauty articles in the Sunday supplements; she saw to it that Lorelei's features became identified with certain makes of biscuits, petticoats, chewing-gums, chocolates, cameras, short-vamp shoes, and bath-tubs. But of all the so-called "grafts" open to handsome girls in her business the quickest and best returns came from prodigal entertainers like Jarvis Hammon.

As Lorelei and her companion left their taxi-cabs and entered Proctor's Hotel, shortly before midnight, they

were met by a head waiter and shown into an ornate ivory-and-gold elevator which lifted them noiselessly to an upper floor. They made their exit into a deep-carpeted hall, at the end of which two splendid creatures in the panoply of German field-marshals stood guard over one of the smaller banquet-rooms.

Hammon himself greeted the girls when they had surrendered their wraps, and, after his introduction to Lorelei, engaged Lilas in earnest conversation.

Lorelei watched him curiously. She saw a powerfully built gray-haired man, whose vigor age had not impaired. In face he was perhaps fifty years old, in body he was much less. He was the typical forceful New York man of affairs, carefully groomed, perhaps a little inclined to stoutness. By this time millionaires had lost their novelty for the girl. She had met some who were more distinguished in appearance than this man, but never one who seemed possessed of more nervous energy and virility. Jarvis Hammon had a bold, incisive manner that was compelling and stamped him as a big man in more ways than one. Playfully he pinched Lilas's cheek, then turned with a smile to say:

"You'll pardon us for whispering, won't you, Miss Knight? You see, Lilas got up this little party, and I've been waiting to consult her about some of the details. Of course, she was late, as usual. However"—he ran an admiring eye over the two girls—"the time wasn't wasted, I see. My! How lovely you both look!"

Taking an arm of each, he swept them toward a reception-room from which issued noisy laughter.

"Awfully good of you to come, Miss Knight. I hope you'll find my friends agreeable and enjoy yourself."

Perhaps twenty men in evening dress and as many elaborately gowned young women were gossiping and smoking as the last comers appeared. Some one raised a vigorous complaint at the host's tardiness, but Hammon

laughed a rejoinder, then gave a signal, whereupon folding-doors at the end of the room were thrown back. From within an orchestra struck up a popular rag-time air, and those nearest the banquet-hall moved toward it. A girl whom Lorelei recognized as a fellow-member of the Revue danced up to her escort with arms extended, and the two turkey-trotted into the larger room.

Hammon was introducing two of his friends—one a languid, middle-aged man who was curled up in a deep chair with a cigarette between his fingers; the other a large-featured person with a rumbling voice. The men had been arguing earnestly, oblivious of the confusion around them; but now the former dropped his cigarette, uncoiled his long form, and, rising, bowed courteously. His appearance as he faced Lorelei was prepossessing, and she breathed a thanksgiving as she took his arm.

Hammon clapped the other gentleman upon the shoulder, crying: "The rail market will take care of itself until to-morrow, Hannibal. What is more to the point, I saw your supper partner flirting with 'Handsome Dan' Avery. Better find her quick."

Lorelei recognized the deep-voiced man as Hannibal C. Wharton, one of the dominant figures in the Steel Syndicate; she knew him instantly from his newspaper pictures. The man beside her, however, was a stranger, and she raised her eyes to his with some curiosity. He was studying her with manifest admiration, despite the fact that his lean features were cast in a sardonic mold.

"It is a pleasure to meet a celebrity like you, Miss Knight," he murmured. "All New York is at your feet, I understand. I'm deeply indebted to Hammon. Blessings on such a host!"

"Oh, don't be hasty. You may dislike me furiously before the evening is over. He does things in a magnificent way, doesn't he? I'm sure this is going to be a splendid party."

As they entered the banquet-hall she gave a little cry of pleasure, for it was evident that Hammon, noted as he was for a lavish expenditure, had outdone himself this time. The whole room had been transformed into a bower of roses, great, climbing bushes, heavy with blooms; masses of cool, green ivy hid the walls from floor to ceiling and were supported upon cunningly wrought trellises through which hidden lights glowed softly. In certain nooks gleamed marble statuettes so placed as to heighten the effect of space and to carry out the idea of a Roman garden.

The table, a horseshoe of silver and white, of glittering plate and sparkling cut-glass, faced a rustic stage which occupied one end of the room; occupying the inner arc of the half-circle was a wide but shallow stone fountain, upon the surface of which floated large-leaved Egyptian pond-lilies. Fat-bellied goldfish with filmy fins, and tails like iridescent wedding trains, propelled themselves indolently about. Two dimpled cupids strained at a marble cornucopia, out of which trickled a stream of water, its whisper drowned now by the noisy admiration of the guests.

But the surprising feature of the decorating scheme was not apparent at first glance. Through the bewildering riot of greenery had been woven an almost invisible netting, and the space behind formed a prison for birds and butterflies. Where they had come from or at what expense they had been procured it was impossible to conceive. But, disturbed by the commotion, the feathered creatures twittered and fluttered against the netting in a panic which drew attention to them even if it did not wholly convey the illusion of a woodland scene. As for the butterflies, no artificial light could deceive them, and they clung with closed wings to leaves and branches, only now and then displaying their full glory in a sleepy protest. There were scores, hundreds of them, and the diners

passed in review of the spectacle like country visitors before the glass tanks of the Aquarium. A strident shriek sounded as a gorgeously caparisoned peacock preened himself; others were discovered here and there, brilliant-hued specimens, voicing shrill indignation.

"How—*beautiful!*" gasped Lorelei, when she had taken in the whole scene. "But—the poor little things are frightened." She looked up to find her companion staring in Hammon's direction with an expression of peculiar, derisive amusement.

Hammon was the center of an admiring group; congratulations were being hurled at him from every quarter. At his side was Lilas Lynn, very dark, very striking, very expensively gowned, and elaborately bejeweled. The room was dinning with the strains of an invisible orchestra and the vocal uproar; topping the confusion came shrieks from the excitable peacocks; the wild birds twittered and beat themselves affrightedly against the netting.

Becoming conscious of Lorelei's gaze, her escort looked down, showing his teeth in a grin that was not of pleasure.

"You like it?" he asked.

"It's beautiful, but—the extravagance is almost criminal."

"Don't tell me how many starving newsboys or how many poor families the cost of this supper would support for a year. I hate poor people. I like to see 'em starve. If you fed them this year they'd starve next, so—what's the difference? Nevertheless, Jarvis *has* surprised me." He paused, and his eyes, as he stared again at the steel magnate, were mocking. "You'll admit it was a dazzling idea—coming from a rolling-mill boss. Now for the ortolans and the humming-bird tongues. No doubt there's a pearl in every wine-cup. Prepare to have your palate tickled with a feather when your appetite flags."

"That's what the Romans did, isn't it?"

"Ah, you are a student as well as an artist, Miss Knight."

"I thought you were going to be pleasant, but you're not, are you?" Lorelei was smiling fixedly.

"No, quite the opposite. Thank God, I'm a dyspeptic."

"Then why did you come here?"

"Why did those birds come? Why did you come?"

"Oh, we—the birds and I—are merely decorations—something to add to the rich man's gaiety. But I'm afraid you don't intend to have a good time, Mr.—" They had found their places at the table, and Lorelei's escort was seating her. "I didn't catch your name when we were introduced."

"Nor I," said he, taking his place beside her. "It sounded like Rice Curry or some other damnable dish, but it's really Merkle—John T. Merkle."

"Ah! You're a banker. Aren't you pretty—reckless confessing your rank, as it were?"

"I'm a bachelor; also an invalid and an insomniac. You couldn't bring me any more trouble than I have."

"You *are* unpleasant."

"I'm famous for it. Being the only bachelor present, I claim the privilege of free speech." Again he looked toward Hammon, and this time he frowned. "From indications I'll soon have company, however."

"Indeed. Is there talk of a divorce there?" She inclined her head in the host's direction.

Merkle retorted acidly: "My dear child, don't try to act the ingénue. You're in the same show as Miss Lynn, and you must know what's going on. This sort of thing can't continue indefinitely, for Mrs. Hammon is very much alive, to say nothing of her daughters. I dare say they'll hear about this supper, which won't improve conditions at home. Now, we both had to come to this Oriental orgy, and, since neither of us enjoys it, let's be natural, at least. I haven't slept lately, and I'm not patient enough to be polite."

"It's a bargain. I'll try to be as disagreeable as you

are," said Lorelei; and Mr. Merkle signified his prompt acquiescence. He lit a huge monogrammed cigarette, pushed aside his *hors d'œuvres*, and reluctantly turned down his array of wine-glasses one by one.

"Can't eat, can't drink, can't sleep," he grumbled. "Stewed prunes and rice for my portion. Waiter, bring me a bottle of vichy, and when it's gone bring me another."

The diners had arranged themselves by now; the supper had begun. Owing to the nature of the affair, there was a complete absence of the stiffness usual at formal banquets, and, since the women were present in quite the same capacity as the performers who were hired to appear later on the stage, they did not allow the moments to drag. A bohemian spirit prevailed; the ardor of the men, lashed on by laughter, coquetry, and smiles, rose quickly; wine flowed, and a general intimacy began. Introductions were no longer necessary, the talk flew back and forth along the rim of the rose-strewn semicircle.

CHAPTER IV

LORELEI turned from the man on her left, who had regaled her with an endless story, the point of which had sent the teller into hiccoughs of laughter, and said to John Merkle:

"I'm glad I'm with you to-night. I don't like drinking men."

"Can a girl in your position afford preferences?" he inquired, tartly. Thus far the banker had fully lived up to his sour reputation.

"All women are extravagant. I have preferences, even if I *can't* afford them. If you were a tippler instead of a plain grouch I could tell you precisely how you'd act and what you'd talk about as the evening goes on. First you'd be gallant and attentive; then you'd forget me and talk business with Mr. Wharton—he's nearest you. About that time I'd begin to learn the real names of these lords of finance. After that you'd become interested in my future. That's always the worst period. Once I'd made you realize that you meant nothing in my life and that my future was provided for, you'd tell me stories about your family—how your wife is an invalid, how Tom is at Yale, how Susie is coming out in the autumn, and how you really had no idea ladies were to be present to-night or you'd never have risked coming. Finally you'd confess that you were naturally impulsive, generous, and affectionate, and merely lacked the encouragement of a kindred spirit like me to become a terrible cut-up. Then you'd insist upon dancing. I'd die if I had to teach you the tango."

Mr. Merkle grunted, "So would I."

She smiled sweetly. "You see, we're both unpleasant people."

Merkle meditated in silence while she attacked her food with a healthy, youthful appetite that awoke his envy.

"I suppose you see a lot of this sort of thing?" he at length suggested.

"There's something of the kind nearly every night. Is this your first experience?"

"Um-m—no. Steel men are notoriously sporty when they get away from home. But I don't go out often."

"This party isn't as bad as some, for the very reason that most of the men are from out of town and it's a bit of a novelty to them. But there's a crowd of regular New-Yorkers — the younger men-about-town —" She paused significantly. "I accepted one invitation from them."

"Only one?"

"It was quite enough."

"I've traveled some," observed Merkle, "but this city is getting to be the limit."

She nodded her amber head. "There's only one Paris, after all, and that's New York. Don't laugh; I read that. We girls remember all the clever things we hear, and use them. Do you see the young person in black and white with the red-nosed man—the one who looks as if he were smelling a rose? Well, she's in our company, and she's very popular at these parties because she's so witty. As a matter of fact, she memorizes the jokes in all the funny papers and springs them as her own. Her men friends say she's too original to be in the show business."

For a moment the girl at Merkle's right engaged his attention, and Lorelei turned again to the incoherent story-teller beside her, who had made it plain by pawing at her that he was bursting once more with tidings of great merriment.

The meal grew noisier; the orchestra interspersed sensuous melodies from the popular successes with the tantalizing rag-time airs that had set the city to singing. Silent-footed attendants deposited tissue-covered packages before the guests. There was a flutter of excitement as the women began to examine their favors.

"What is it?" Merkle inquired, leaning toward Lorelei.

"The new saddle-bag purse. See? It's very Frenchy. Gold fittings—and a coin-purse and card-case inside. See the monogram? I'm going to keep this."

"Don't you keep all your gifts?"

"Not the expensive ones. Lilas picked these out for Mr. Hammon, and they're exquisite. We share the same dressing-room, you know."

Merkle regarded her with a sudden new interest.

"You and she dress together?"

"Yes."

"Then—I dare say you're close friends?"

"We're close enough—in that room; but scarcely friends. What did you get?"

He unrolled the package at his plate.

"A gold safety razor—evidently a warning not to play with edged tools. I wonder if Miss Lynn bought one for Jarvis?"

"Now, why did you say that," Lorelei asked, quickly, "and why did you ask in that peculiar tone if she and I were friends?"

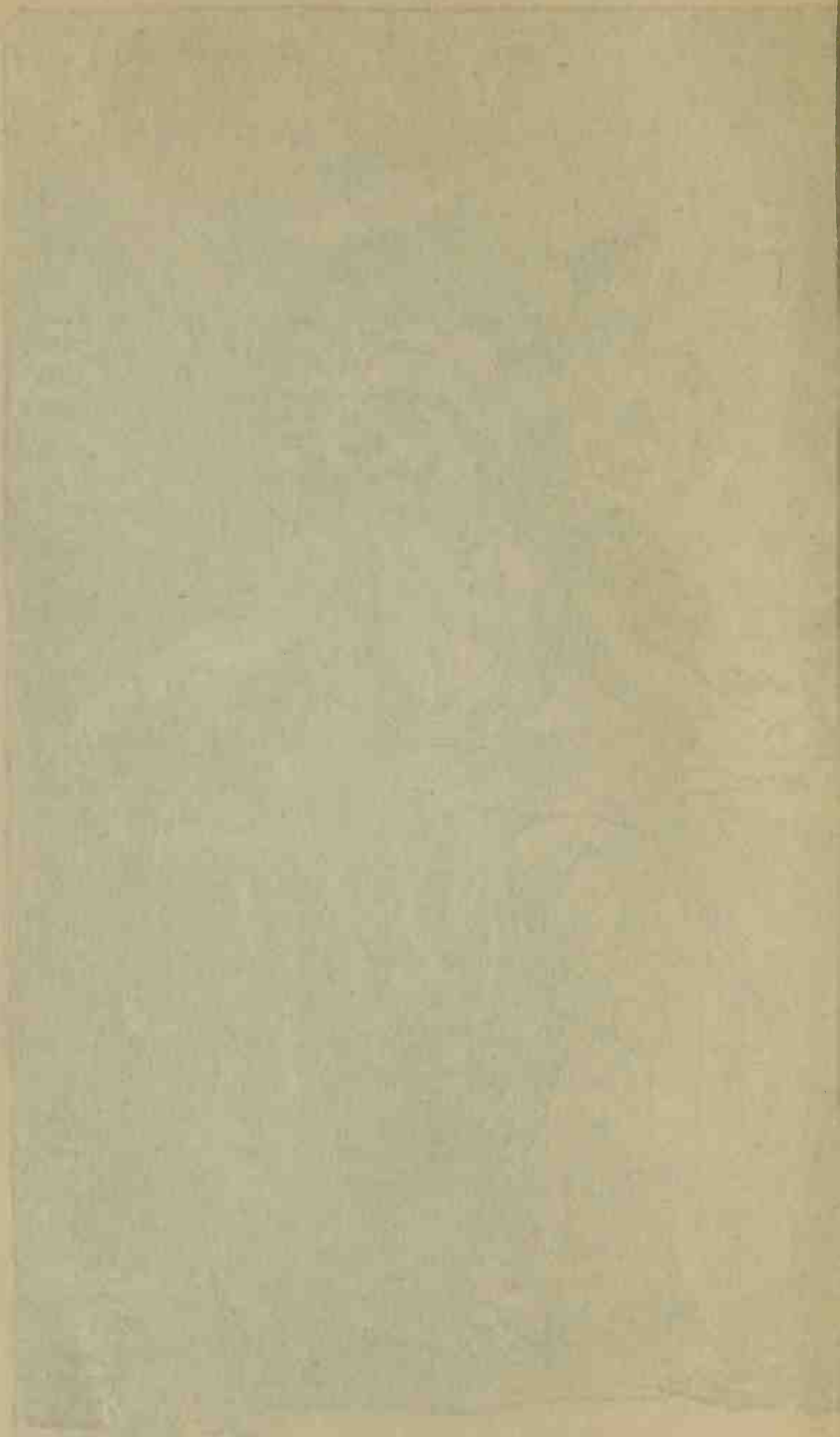
The man leaned closer, saying in a voice that did not carry above the clamor:

"I suppose you know she's making a fool of him? I suppose you realize what it means when a woman of her stamp gets a man with money in her power? You must know all there is to know from the outside; it occurred to me that you might also know something about the inside of the affair. Do you?"

"I'm afraid not. All I've heard is the common gossip."

"I'VE traveled some," observed Merkle, "but this amber head. "There's only one Paris, after all, We girls remember all the clever things we hear and

city is getting to be the limit." Lorelei nodded her and that's New York. Don't laugh. I read that use them."



"There's a good deal here that doesn't show on the surface. That woman is a menace to a great many people, of whom I happen to be one."

"You speak as if she were a dangerous character, and as if she had deliberately entangled him," Lorelei said, defendingly. "As a matter of fact, she did nothing of the sort; she avoided him as long as she could, but he forced his attentions upon her. He's a man who refuses defeat. He persisted, he persecuted her until she was forced to—accept him. Men of his wealth can do anything, you know. Sometimes I think—but it's none of my business."

"What do you sometimes think?"

"That she hates him."

"Nonsense."

"I know she did at first; I don't wonder that she makes him pay now. It's according to her code and the code of this business."

"I can't believe she—dislikes him."

"He may have won her finally, but at first she refused his gifts, refused even to meet him."

"She had scruples?"

"No more than the rest of us, I presume. She gave her two weeks' notice because he annoyed her; but before the time was up Bergman took a hand. He sent for her one evening, and when she went down there was Mr. Hammon, too. When she came up-stairs she was hysterical. She cried and laughed and cursed—it was terrible."

"Curious," murmured the man, staring at the object of their controversy. "What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing connected. She called him every kind of a monster, accused him of every crime from murder to—"

"Murder!" The banker started.

"He had made a long fight to beat her down, and she was unstrung. She seemed to have a queer physical aversion to him."

"Humph! She's got nobly over *that.*"

"I've told you this because you seemed to think she's to blame, when it is all Mr. Hammon's doing."

"It's a peculiar situation—very. You've interested me. But the man himself is peculiar, extraordinary. You can't draw a proper line on his conduct without knowing the circumstances of his home life, and, in fact, his whole mental make-up. Sometime I'll tell you his story; I think it would interest you. In a way I don't blame him for seeking amusement and happiness where he can find it, and yet—I'm afraid of the result. This supper means more than you can understand or than I can explain."

"The city is full of Samsons, and most of them have their Delilahs."

Merkle agreed. "These men put Hammon where he is. I wonder if they will let him stay there. It depends upon that girl yonder." He turned to answer a question from Hannibal Wharton, and Lorelei gave her attention to the part of the entertainment which was beginning on the stage. Turn after turn appeared; black-faced comedians, feature acts from vaudeville and from the reigning successes, high-priced singers, dancers, monologists followed each other. Occasionally they were applauded, but more frequently their efforts to amuse were lost in the self-made merriment of the diners. Now and then an actor was bombarded with jests or openly guyed. Music and wine flowed as steadily as the crystal stream of the fountain; faces became flushed; glasses rang. The women chattered; the men raised loud voices; the birds fluttered and the peacocks shrieked. It all blended in a blood-stirring, Bacchanalian joviality. Only now and then the frolic threatened to become a carouse, and the revel bordered upon a debauch.

Of a sudden the clamor was silenced, and indifference gave place to curiosity, for the music had begun the introduction to one of Adorée Demorest's songs.

"Her rubies are the finest in the world." "Too strong for Paris, so she came to New York." "Anything goes here if it's bad enough," came from various quarters.

Lorelei had never seen this much-discussed actress, whose wickedness had set the town agog, and her first impression was vaguely disappointing. Miss Demorest's beauty was by no means remarkable, although it was accentuated by the most bizarre creation of the French shops. She was animated, audacious, Gallic in accent and postures—she was vividly alive with a magnetism that meant much more than beauty; but she over-exerted her voice, and her song was nothing to excite applause. At last she was off, in a whirl of skirts, a generous display of hosiery, and a great bobbing of the aigrette pompon that towered above her like an Indian head-dress. Only a moment later she was on again, this time in a daring costume of solid black, against and through which her limbs flashed with startling effect as she performed her famous Danse de Nuit.

"Hm-m! Nothing very extreme about that," remarked Merkle, at length. "It would be beautiful if it were better done."

Lorelei agreed. She had been staring with all a woman's intentness at this sister whose strength consisted of her frailty, and now inquired:

"How does she get away with it?"

"By the power of suggestion, I dare say. Her public is looking for something devilish, and discovers whatever it chooses to imagine in what she says and does."

Hannibal Wharton had changed his seat, and, regardless of the dancer, began a conversation with Merkle. After a time Lorelei heard him say:

"It cost me five thousand dollars to pay for the damage those boys did. They threatened to jail Bob, but of course I couldn't allow that."

"I remember. That was five years ago, and Bob

hasn't changed a whit. I think he's a menace to society."

Wharton laughed, but his reply was lost in the clamorous demand for an encore by Mlle. Demorest.

"So he gets his devilment from you, eh?" Merkle inquired.

"It isn't devilment. Bob's all right. He's running with a fast crowd, and he has to keep up his end."

"Bah! He hasn't been sober in a year."

"You're a dyspeptic, John. You were born with a gray beard, and you're not growing younger. He wanted to come to this party, but—I didn't care to have him for obvious reasons, so I told Hammon to refuse him even if he asked. He bet me a thousand dollars that he'd come anyhow, and I've been expecting him to overpower those doormen or creep up the fire-escape."

The hand-clapping ceased as the dancer reappeared, smiling and bowing.

"I will dance again if you wish," she announced, in perfect English, "introducing my new partner, Mr.—" she glanced into the wings inquiringly—"Señor Roberto. It is his first public appearance in this country, and we will endeavor to execute a variation of the Argentine tango. Señor Roberto is a poor boy; he begs you to applaud him in order that he may secure an engagement and support his old father." She stooped laughingly to confer with the orchestra leader, who had broken cover at her announcement.

Mr. Wharton was still talking. "That's my way of raising a son. I taught Bob to drink when I drank, to smoke when I smoked, and all that. My father raised me that way."

The opening strain of a Spanish dance floated out from the hidden musicians, Mlle. Demorest whirled into view in the arms of a young man in evening dress. She was still laughing, but her partner wore a grave face, and his

eyes were lowered; he followed the intricate movements of the dance with some difficulty. To Lorelei he appeared disappointingly amateurish. Then a ripple of merriment, growing into a guffaw, advised her that something out of the ordinary was occurring.

"The—scoundrel!" Hannibal Wharton cried.

Merkle observed dryly: "He's won your thousand. I withdraw what I said about him; it requires a gigantic intelligence to outwit you." To Lorelei he added: "This will be considered a great joke on Broadway."

"That is Mr. Wharton's son?"

"It is—and the most dissipated lump of arrogance in New York."

"Bob," the father shouted, "quit that foolishness and come down here!" But the junior Wharton, his eyes fixed upon the stage, merely danced the harder. When the exhibition ended he bowed, hand in hand with Miss Demorest, then leaped nimbly over the footlights and made his way toward Jarvis Hammon, nodding to the men as he passed.

A moment later he sank into a chair near his father, saying: "Well, dad, what d'you think of my educated legs? I learned that at night school."

Wharton grumbled unintelligibly, but it was plain that he was not entirely displeased at his son's prank.

"You were superb," said Merkle, warmly. "It's the best thing I ever saw you do, Bob. You could almost make a living for yourself at it."

The young man grinned, showing rows of firm, strong teeth. Lorelei, who was watching him, decided that he must have at least twice the usual number; yet it was a good mouth—a good, big, generous mouth.

"Thanks for those glorious words of praise; that's more than we're doing on the Street nowadays. Miss Demorest said we'd 'execute' the dance, and we did. We certainly killed Señor Thomas W. Tango, and I'll be

shot at sunrise for stamping on Adorée's insteps. I looked before I leaped, but I couldn't decide where to put my feet. Whew! Got any grape-juice for a growing boy?" He helped himself to his father's wine-glass and drained it. "You can settle now, dad—one thousand iron men. I owe it to Demorest."

"What do you mean?"

"Debt of honor. I heard she was due here with some kind of an electric thrill, so I offered her my share of the sweepstakes to further disgrace herself by dancing with me. She's an expensive doll; she needs that thousand—mortgage on the old family opera-house, no shoes for little sister, and mother selling papers to square the landlord." He caught Lorelei's eye and stared boldly. "Hello! I believe in fairies, too, dad. Introduce me to the Princess."

Merkle volunteered this service, and Bob promptly hitched his chair closer. Lorelei saw that he was very drunk, and marveled at his control during the recent exhibition.

"Tell me more about the 'Parti-color Petticoat' and 'Dentol Chewing-Gum,' Miss Knight. Your face is a household word in every street-car," he began.

She replied promptly, quoting haphazard from the various advertisements in which she figured. "It never shrinks; it holds its shape; it must be seen to be appreciated; is cool, refreshing, and prevents decay."

"How did you meet that French dancer?" Hannibal Wharton queried, sourly, of his son.

"I stormed the stage door, bullied the door-man, and waylaid her in the wings. She thought I was you, dad. Wharton is a grand old name." He chuckled at his father's exclamation. "She's a good fellow, though, and I don't blame the King of What's-its-name. Kings have to spend their money somewhere. Maybe I can induce her to invest some of the royal dough in stocks and bonds. The prospect dizzies me."

"The crowd in your office would give you a banquet if you sold something," Merkle told him.

Wharton, Senior, pressed for further information. "Where did you learn those Argentine wiggles?"

"Hard times are to blame, dad. The old men on the Exchange play golf all day, and the young ones turkey-trot all night. I stay up late in the hope that I may find a quarter that some suburbanite has dropped. It's dangerous to drive an automobile through a dark street these days; one's liable to run down a starving banker or an indigent broker with a piece of lead pipe and a mask. You find it so, don't you, Miss Knight?"

"I have no automobile," said the girl.

"Strange. Show business on the blink, too, eh?" The elder men rose and sauntered away in the direction of their host, whereupon Bob winked.

"They've left us flat. Why? Because the wicked Mlle. Demorest has finally made her appearance as a guest. My dad is a splendid shock-absorber. Naughty, naughty papa!"

"It's probably well that you came with her; fathers are so indiscreet."

Young Wharton signaled to a waiter who was passing with a wine-bottle in a napkin.

"Tarry!" he cried. "Remove the shroud, please, and let me look at poor old Roderer. Thanks. How natural he tastes." Then to Lorelei: "The governor is a woman-hater; but, just the same, I'm glad you drew Merkle instead of him to-night, or there'd surely be a scandal in the Wharton family. No man is safe in range of your liquid orbs, Miss Knight, unless he has his marriage license sewed into his clothes. Mother keeps hers framed. Wouldn't she enjoy reading the list of Hammon's guests at this party? 'Among those present were Mr. Hannibal C. Wharton, the well-known rolling-mill man; Miss Lorelei Knight, Principal First-Act Fairy of the

Bergman Revue; and Mlle. Adorée Demorest, the friend of a king. A good time was had by all, and the diners enjoyed themselves very nice.'" He laughed loudly, and the girl stirred.

"She'd be pleased to read also that you came late, but highly intoxicated."

"Ah! Salvation Nell." Bob took no offense. "If the hour was late she'd know that my intoxication followed as a matter of course. It always does, just as the dew succeeds the sunset, as the track follows the wheelbarrow, as the cracker pursues the cheese. I am a derivative of alcohol, the one and infallible argument against temperance, Miss Knight. In me you behold the shining example of all that puts the reformer to rout and gladdens the heart of the café-keeper."

"You talk as if you were always drunk."

"Oh—not always. By day I am frequently sober, but at such times I am fit company for neither man nor beast; I am harsh and unsympathetic; I scheme and I connive. With nightfall, however, there comes a metamorphosis. Ah! Believe *me!* When the Clover Club is strained and descends like the gentle dew of heaven, when the Bronx is mixed and the Martini shimmers in the first rays of the electric light, then I humanize and harmonize. For me gin is a tonic, rum a restorative, vermuth a balm. Once I am stocked up with ales, wines, liquors, and cigars, I become attuned to the nobler sentiments of life. I aspire. I make friends with lonely derelicts whose digestions have foundered on seas of vichy and buttermilk, and I show them the joys of alcoholism—without cost. We share each other's pleasures and perplexities, at my expense. They are my brothers. I am optimistic; I laugh; I play cards for money; I turkey-trot. I become a living, palpitating influence for good, spreading happiness and prosperity in my wake."

"Do you consider yourself in such a condition now?"

queried Lorelei, who had been vaguely amused at this Rubaiyat.

"I am, and, since it is long past the closing hour of one and the tango parlors are dark, suppose we blow this 'Who's Who in Pittsburg' and taxi-cab it out to a road-house where the bass fiddle is still inhabited and the second generation is trotting to the 'Robert E. Lee'?"

Lorelei shook her head with a smile.

"Don't you dance?"

"Doesn't everybody dance?"

"Then how did you break your leg?"

"I don't care to go."

"Strange!" Mr. Wharton helped himself to a goblet of wine, appearing to heap the liquor above the edge of the glass. "Now, if I were sober I could understand how you might prefer these 'pappy guys' to me, for nobody likes me then, but I'm agreeably pickled. I'm just like everybody you'll be likely to meet at this time of night. Merkle won't take you anywhere, for he's full of distilled water and has a directors' meeting at ten. I overflow with spirits and have a noontide engagement with an Ostermoor."

"Why don't you ask Miss Demorest? She came with you?"

Wharton sighed hopelessly. "Something queer about that Jane. D'you know what made us so late? She went to mass on the way down."

"Mass? At that hour?"

"It was a special midnight service conducted for actors. I sat in the taxi and waited. It did me a lot of good."

Some time later Merkle returned to find Bob still animatedly talking; catching Lorelei's eye, he signified a desire to speak with her, but she found it difficult to escape from the intoxicated young man at her side. At last, however, she succeeded, and joined her supper com-

panion at the farther edge of the fountain, where the tireless cupids still poured water from the cornucopias.

Merkle was watching his friend's son with a frown.

"You have just left the personification of everything I detest," he volunteered. "You heard what his father said about raising him—how he taught Bob to drink when he drank and follow in his footsteps? Well, sometimes the theory works and a boy grows up with open eyes, but more often it turns out as it has in this case. Bob's an alcoholic, a common drunkard, and he'll end in an institution, sure. He'd be there now if it wasn't for Hannibal's money. He's run the gamut of extravagance; he's done everything freakish that there is to do. But that isn't what I want to say to you. Help me feed these foolish goldfish while I talk."

"Do you think anybody would understand if they overheard you? I fancied you and I were the only sober ones left."

"Some of the girls are all right." Merkle eyed his companion closely. "Don't you drink?"

"I daren't, even if I cared to."

"Daren't?"

"You'll notice that most of the pretty girls are sober."

"Right."

"I have nothing but my looks. Wouldn't I be a fool to sacrifice them?"

"You seem to be sensible, Miss Knight. Something tells me you're very much the right sort. I know you're trying to get ahead, and—I can help you if you'll help me."

"Help you 'get ahead'?"

He smiled. "Hardly. I need an agent, and I'll pay a good price to the right person."

"How mysterious!"

"I'll be plain. That affair yonder"—he nodded toward Jarvis Hammon and Lilas Lynn—"strikes you as a—

well, as a flirtation of the ordinary sort. In one way it is; in another way it is something very different, for he's in earnest. He thinks he is injuring no one but himself with this business, and he is willing to pay the price; but the fact is he is putting other people in peril—me among the rest. I'm not arguing for his wife nor the two Misses Hammon. I don't go much on the ordinary kinds of morality, and nobody outside of a man's family has the right to question his private life so long as it is private in its consequences. But when his secret conduct affects his business affairs, when it endangers vast interests in which others are concerned, then his associates are entitled to take a hand. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly. But you don't want me; you want a detective."

"My dear child, we have them by the score. We hire them by the year, and they have told us all they can. We need inside information."

The girl's answer was made with her habitual self-possession.

"I've heard about such things. I've heard about men prying into each other's private affairs, pretending to be friends when they were enemies, and using scandal for business ends. Lilas Lynn is my friend—at least in a way—and Mr. Hammon is my host, just as he is yours. Oh, I know; this isn't a conventional party, and I'm not here as a conventional guest—inside the little coin-purse he gave me is a hundred-dollar bill—but, just the same, I don't care to act as your spy."

Merkle's grave attention arrested Lorelei's burst of indignation.

"Will you believe me," he asked, "when I tell you that Jarvis Hammon and Hannibal Wharton are the two best friends I have in the world? There is such a thing as loyalty and friendship even in big business; in fact, high finance is founded on confidence and personal

honor. This is more than a business matter, Miss Knight."

"I can hardly believe that."

"It's true, however; I mean to serve Hammon. At the same time I must serve myself and those who trust me. My honor is concerned in this as well as his, and there is a rigid code in money matters. If what I suspect is true, Hammon's infatuation promises to do harm to innocent people. I fear—in fact, I'm sure—that he is being used. I've learned things about Miss Lynn that you may not know. What you have told me to-night adds to my anxiety, and I must know more."

"What, for instance?"

"Her real feeling for him—her intentions—her relations with a man named Melcher—"

"Maxey Melcher?"

"The same. You know his business?"

"No."

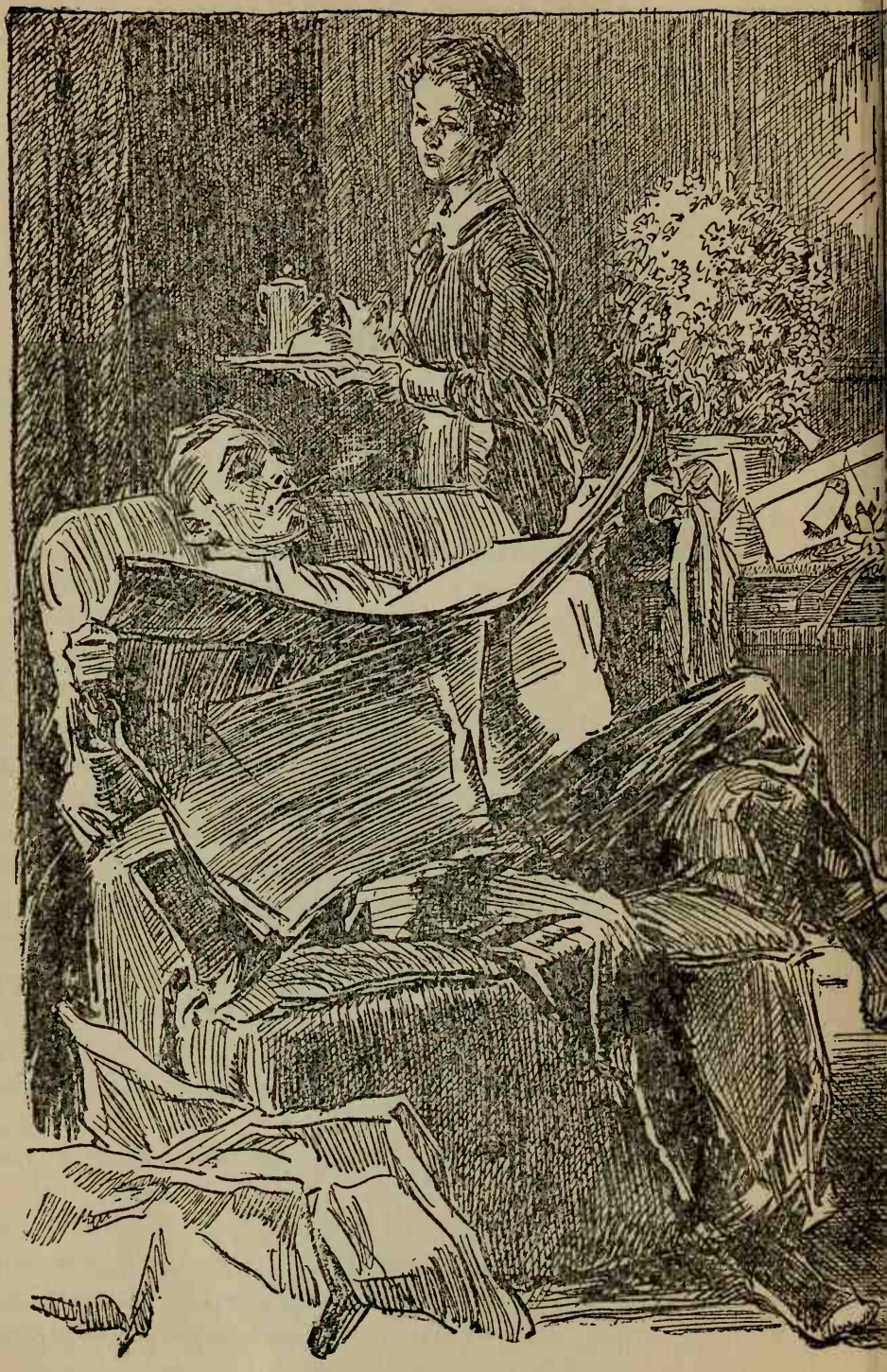
"He is a gambler, a political power; a crafty, unscrupulous fellow who represents—big people. By helping me you can serve many innocent persons and, most of all, perhaps, Hammon himself."

Lorelei was silent for a moment. "This is very unusual," she said, at length. "I don't know whether to believe you or not."

"Suppose, then, you let the matter rest and keep your eyes open. When you convince yourself who means best to Jarvis—Miss Lynn and Melcher and their crowd, or I and mine—make your decision. You may name your own price."

"There wouldn't be any price," she told him, impatiently. "I'll wait."

Merkle bowed. "I can trust your discretion. Thank you for listening to me, and thank you for being agreeable to an irascible old dyspeptic. Will you permit me to drive you home when you're ready?"



"WELL, every time I come through with a suggestion makers like you, anyhow?"

ma crabs it. What's the use of talking to a pair of hay-

"I'm ready now."

But as Lorelei made her way unobtrusively toward the cloak-room she encountered Robert Wharton, who barred her path.

"Fairy Princess, you ran away," he declared, accusingly.

"I'm leaving." She saw that his intoxication had reached a more advanced stage. His cheeks were flushed; his eyes were wild and unsteady.

"Good news! The night is young; we'll watch it grow up."

"Thank you, no. I'm going home."

"A common mistake. Others have tried and failed." With extreme gravity he focused his gaze upon her, saying, "Home is the one place that our mayor can't close."

She extended her hand. "Good night."

"I don't understand. Speak English."

"Good night."

Wharton's countenance darkened unpleasantly, and his voice was rough. "Where'd you learn that line? It's country stuff. We'll leave when I'm ready. Now we'll have a trot."

The music was playing; other couples were dancing, and he seized her in his arms, whirling her away. In and out among the chairs he piloted a dizzy course, while she yielded reluctantly, conscious, meanwhile, that Adorée Demorest was watching them with interest.

For an interval Wharton said nothing; then, with a change of tone, he murmured in her ear: "D'you think I'd let you spoil the whole night? Can't you see I'm crazy about you?"

Lorelei endeavored to free herself from his embrace, but he clutched her the tighter and laughed insolently.

"Nothing like a good 'turkey' to get acquainted, is there? We're going to dance till we're old folks."

She continued to struggle; they were out of step and

out of time, but he held her away from himself easily, bending a hot glance upon her upturned face. She saw that he was panting and doubly drunk with her nearness. "Don't fight. I've got you."

She was smiling faintly, out of habit, but, mistaking her expression, he drew her close once more, then buried his face in her neck and kissed her just at the turn of her bare shoulder.

Then she tore herself away, and his triumphant laugh was cut short as she slapped him resoundingly, her stinging fingers leaving their imprint on his cheek.

Her eyes were flaming and her lips were white with fury, though she continued to smile.

"Here! What d'you mean by that?" he cried.

She silenced him sharply: "Hush! Remember you broke in here. I'd like to see you in that fountain."

There was a swish of garments, a musical laugh, and Adorée Demorest was between them.

"I'm madly jealous, Señor Roberto," she exclaimed. "Come, you must dance once more with me. We'll finish this. What?" She swayed toward him in sympathy with the music, snapping her fingers and humming the words of the song.

"She—walloped me—like a sailor," the young man stammered, incoherently. "She—wants to see me in the fountain."

"Then jump in like a gentleman," laughed the danseuse. "But dance with me first." She entwined her arms about him and forced him into motion. As she danced away she signaled over her shoulder to Lorelei, who made haste to seek the cloak-room.

When she emerged John Merkle was waiting in the hall. A shout of laughter echoed from the banquet-hall, and she started.

"That's nothing," Merkle told her. "Bob Wharton is in the fountain. He says he's a goldfish."

CHAPTER V

ONE of the minor readjustments forced upon the Knight family by the nature of Lorelei's work was that of meal-hours. Peter, from long custom of early rising in the country, insisted upon his breakfast at seven, and in spite of his inaction demanded dinner at noon and supper at six. Jim, being erratic in habit, exacted his meals at any hour that suited his appetite, while Mrs. Knight, now that she had a housemaid, ate with first one, then another. But no matter how chaotic the general household schedule, Lorelei was always assured of ten hours' sleep, a dainty breakfast upon rising, and a substantial meal before theater-time. Her mother saw to it that this program was religiously adhered to. At whatever hour of the night Lorelei might come in, no sound was ever allowed to disturb her until she arose. Irrespective also of her careless disregard of social appointments, she was never permitted to miss one with the hair-dresser, the manicure, the masseuse, or the dozen and one other beauty specialists who form as important an adjunct to the stage-woman's career as to that of the woman of fashion. All this was a vital part of that plan to which the mother had devoted herself. She attended the girl's health and good looks with a devout singleness of purpose that would have been admirable in a better cause. No race-horse on the eve of a Derby was groomed more carefully than this budding woman. In preparing her for masculine conquest the entire family took a hand. Her prospects, her actions, her triumphs,

were the main topic of conversation; all other interests were subordinated to the matrimonial quest upon which she had embarked. The men she met were investigated, discussed, speculated upon until their every characteristic was worn threadbare. The domestic arrangements that resulted were of necessity unhappy, for the housework was allowed to take care of itself. The male members shifted as best they could, and the home was forever in slovenly confusion. Nevertheless, the existing condition of affairs met the approval of all; and the three conspirators lived in a constant state of eager expectation over Lorelei's fortunes.

Mother and daughter were loitering over a midday breakfast, and Lorelei, according to custom, was recounting the incidents of the previous evening.

"It's too bad you quarreled with Mr. Wharton," Mrs. Knight commented, when she heard the full story of Hammon's party. "He'll dislike you now."

The girl shrugged daintily. "He was drunk and fresh. I can't bear a man in such a condition."

"But—he's terribly rich, and he's an only son. He'll inherit everything. Is he nice-looking?"

"Um-m—yes."

"You shouldn't antagonize a man like him, my dear. He's single, at least; and naturally he's impulsive, like all those young millionaires. They have so many girls to choose from, you know. Young Powell, who married Norma Gale, was the same sort. She was twice his age, but he married her just the same, and his people made a fine settlement to get rid of her. She was—tough, too. Mrs. Wharton is a great club-woman and the head of a thousand charities."

"That's no sign she's charitable."

"You can't tell. She might take you right into the family."

"Bob is an alcoholic. He's no good, so Mr. Merkle said."

Jim, who was immersed in the morning paper, spoke from his chair near the window.

"Why don't you go after Merkle himself, Sis? Easy picking, these bankers."

Jim also had come home in the still hours of the night before, and had but lately made his breakfast on a cup of coffee, three cigarettes, and the racing sheet of the *Morning Telegraph*. He wore his pajama jacket over a silk undershirt, and was now resting preparatory to his daily battle with the world. Just how the struggle went or where it was waged the others knew not at all.

His mother shook her head. "Those old men are all alike. Mr. Hammon will never marry Lilas."

"Is that so?" James abandoned his reading. "The older they are, the softer they get. Take it from me, on the word of a volunteer fireman, Lilas will cash in on him quicker than you think. I know."

"How do you know?" inquired his sister.

"Never mind how. Maybe I've got second sight. Anyhow, the info is right; Hammon's in the game-bag."

"Who told you?"

"Maybe I got it in the dog-eared dope," mocked the brother. "Maybe Max Melcher told me. Anyhow, you could land Merkle just as easy if you'd declare Max in."

"Now, Jim," protested Mrs. Knight, "I won't let you put such ideas into her head. You and—that gang of yours—are full of tricks, but Lorelei's decent, and she's going to stay decent. You'd get everybody in jail or in the newspapers."

"Has Maxey ever been in jail? Has Tony the Barber? No, you bet they haven't, and they never will be. This jail talk is funny. Just wait and see how easy Lilas gets hers. Of course, if Lorelei could *marry* Wharton, that would be different, but he's no sucker."

"How is Lilas going to get hers?" insisted Lorelei.

"Wait and see." James returned to his paper.

"She'll never marry him. She hates him."

Jim laughed, and his sister broke out irritably:

"Why be so mysterious? Anybody would think you'd robbed a bank."

Jim looked up again, and this time with a scowl. "Well, every time I come through with a suggestion ma crabs it. What's the use of talking to a pair of haymakers like you, anyhow? I could grab a lot of coin for us if you'd let me. Why, Maxey has been after me a dozen times about you, but I knew you wouldn't stand for it."

"Blackmail, eh?"

Jim was highly disgusted. "What's the difference how you pronounce it? It spells k-a-l-e, and it takes a good-looking girl to pull off a deal in this town. When Lilas lands Hammon she'll be through with the show business for good. The Kaiser suite on the *Imperator* for hers."

Lorelei flung aside her napkin with an exclamation.

"What's wrong now?" demanded Jim. "Sore again because I offer to make a few pennies for you? All right—play for Bob Wharton. I'd like to meet him, though; he can do me a lot of good."

"How?"

"Well, he dropped eighty-four hundred in Hebling's Sixth Avenue joint the other night. Maxey owns a place on Forty-sixth Street where the sky is the limit."

His sister was staring at him curiously. She had voiced misgivings concerning his activities of late, but Jim had never satisfied her inquiries. Now she asked: "What is your share?"

The young man laughed a little uncomfortably. "Forty per cent. That's usual. If he's going to gamble somewhere I might as well be in on it."

Lorelei turned to her mother, but Mrs. Knight seemed puzzled at this turn of the conversation. The girl's next words, however, left no doubt as to her feelings.

"You're a fine specimen, aren't you?" Her lip curled;

mother and son started at the bitterness of the tone. "You're in a fine business, too, blackmailing with Tony the Barber's crowd, and capping for a jinny."

"Who said anything about a jinny?"

"Ugh! What a mess you've made of things. Two years ago we were decent, and now—" Lorelei's voice broke; her eyes filmed over with tears. "I'd give anything in the world if we were all back in Vale. It took only two years of the city to spoil us."

"Never mind the dramatics," Jim growled. "What's your kick? You're on Broadway, ain't you?"

"Yes, with a six-room flat on Amsterdam Avenue. Pa is a cripple, you're a crook, and I'm—"

The mother broke in sharply. "Jim is no crook. You've no right to talk like this, after all we've done for you."

"Sure. Why did we come to New York, anyhow?" echoed the young man. "What brought us here? Ain't you having the time of your young life—parties, presents, joy-rides, every day? Gee! I wish I made the coin you do."

"I hate it."

"Ha! Better try Vale again. You'd end in a straight-jacket if you did. You think you could go back, but you couldn't—nobody can after they've had a taste of the city."

"It's all wrong. The whole thing is—rotten. Sometimes I hate myself." Lorelei choked.

Mrs. Knight spoke reprovingly. "Don't be silly, dear. You know we did it all for you. Peter didn't want to leave home, and Jim had a good job, but we gave up everything to let you have a chance. Yes, and we've all worked for you every minute since. Do you think I like this stuffy flat, after that other house with the yard and the trees and the sunshine? Peter lies in his room here, day in and day out, and never has a moment's comfort or pleasure. I don't know a soul; I haven't a friend

or a neighbor. But we're not complaining." Mrs. Knight put added feeling into her words. "We don't want you to live the way we've had to live; we want you to be rich and to have things. After all we've done; after all poor Peter has suffered—"

"Don't!" cried the girl, falteringly. "I think of him every hour."

"He isn't the sort that complains. I consider it very thoughtless of you to behave as you do and make it harder for us." Mrs. Knight sniffed and wiped her eyes, whereupon Lorelei went to her and hid her face upon her mother's shoulder.

"I don't want to be unkind," she murmured, "but sometimes I'm sick with disgust, and then again I'm frightened. Where are we heading? What's going to become of us?—of me? That man, last night—there was something in his face, something in the way he held me—just as if I were his for the taking. It isn't the first time I've seen it, either. All the men I meet are beasts. That whole party was sordid and mean—old men drinking with girls and pawing them over. Mr. Merkle was the only nice one there." The mother was dismayed to feel her daughter shiver.

"Good Lord! You people make me sick," cried Jim, rising and making for his room. "Anybody'd think you'd been insulted."

When he had gone Mrs. Knight asked, accusingly:

"Lorelei, are you *in love?*"

"No. Why?"

"You've said some queer things lately. You've worried me. I hope you'll never be tempted to do anything so—to be foolish. Just look at the girls who have made silly matches; they all go back to work. You can't be too careful with the men you meet, for you're so beautiful that they'll promise you anything or pretend to be everything they aren't. I don't intend to let you make a mess

of things by marrying some chorus-man. When the right person comes along you'll accept him, then you'll never have to worry again. But you *must* be careful."

"Do you think I'd be happy with a man like Mr. Wharton?"

"Why not? You'd at least be rich, and if rich people can't be happy, who can? If you accepted some poor boy he'd probably turn out to be a drunkard and a loafer, just like Wharton is now." She sighed. "I'd like to see you settled; we could take Peter to a specialist, and maybe he could be cured. The doctor says there is a chance. But it would take a world of money."

"I'll get the money."

"How?"

"Somehow. If you'd let me economize on clothes, and if Jim would help a little, we could save enough."

"Jim has all he can do to take care of himself—I'm sure I don't know how he manages—and you've got to keep up appearances. No; Peter will have to wait till you're married—only I did hope, when you told me about Robert Wharton, that he might be the one. We could go abroad and get the help of those German surgeons. I've always wanted to travel."

When Lorelei reached the theater that evening she found Lilas Lynn entertaining a caller who had been more than once in her thoughts during the day. Jim's reference to Max Melcher had recalled Mr. Merkle's earnest words of the previous night, and, although her brother had implied that Melcher was engineering the affair between Lilas and the steel man, Lorelei could not bring herself to take the statement seriously. It was too absurd. She could not imagine how such a thing could be managed by a third person, or how he could profit by it. Her stage experience had acquainted her with several intrigues in which the men's names were nearly as prominent as Hammon's; but in no case had anything more

serious than gossip eventuated. A number of such attachments had resulted in happy marriages, although at the price of an occasional divorce. She remembered, now that she thought of it, that Merkle had mentioned the probability of that very thing in this instance. She began to doubt the banker's unselfishness and to question his motives, arguing, as she had done at first, that even if Hammon were really in danger it was no business of hers.

This lesson of non-interference in the affairs of others she had learned during her recent life, spent in an atmosphere not so much immoral as unmoral. For two years she had moved in a world where matters the mere mention of which would not have been tolerated in Vale were openly discussed. These topics were treated frankly, moreover, and with a wise cynicism which, in Lorelei's case, had proven protective. Gratuitous advice, however, was seldom welcomed, and a policy of "Hands off" prevailed.

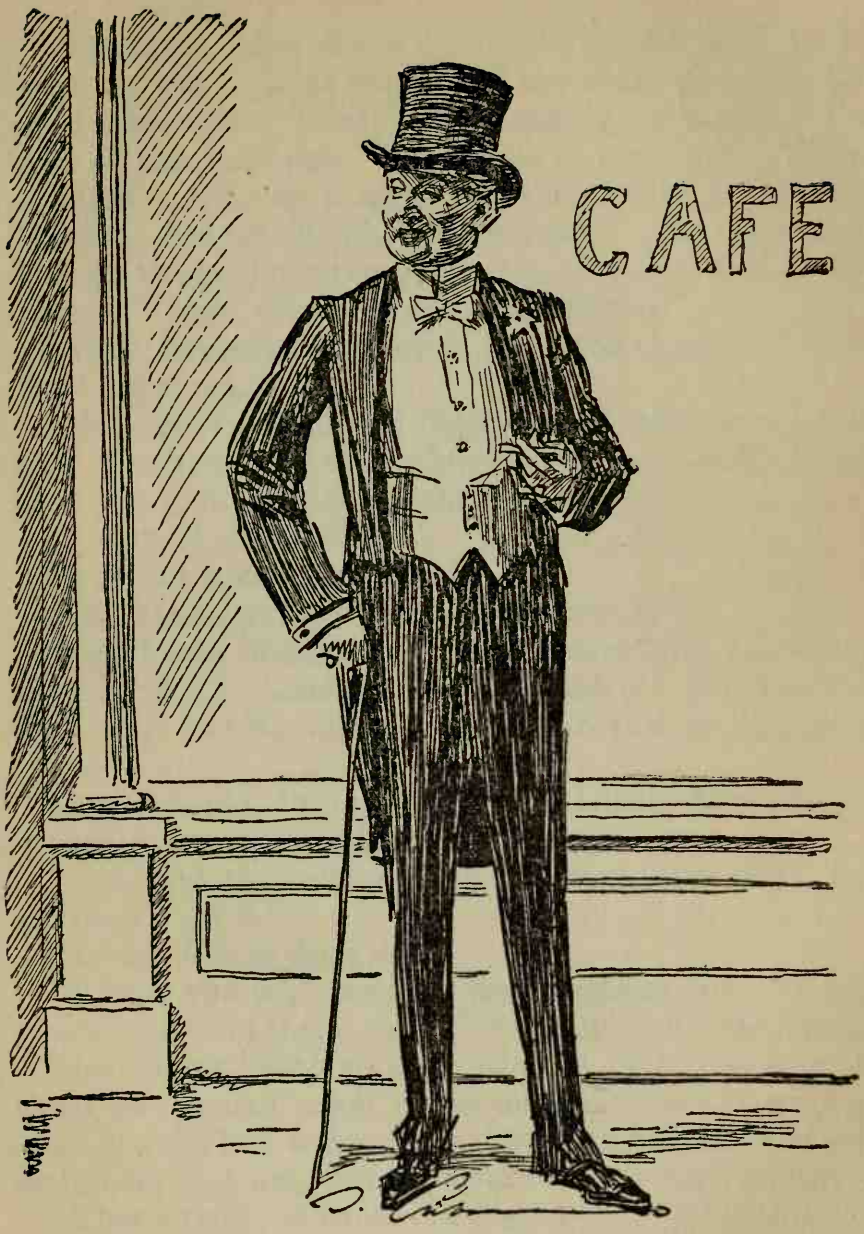
Miss Lynn's visitor was a well-tailored man who gave a first impression of extreme physical neatness. He was immaculate in attire, his skin was fine, his color fresh; a pair of small, imperturbable eyes were set in a smiling face beneath a prematurely gray head. Max Melcher was a figure on Broadway; he had the entrée to all the stage-doors; he frequented the popular cafés, where he surrounded himself with men. Always affable, usually at leisure, invariably obliging, he had many friends.

At Lorelei's entrance he smiled and nodded without rising, then continued his earnest conversation with Miss Lynn. None of their words were audible to the last comer until Melcher rose to leave; then Lilas halted him with a nervous laugh, saying:

"Remember, if it doesn't go, it's a joke, and I run to cover."

"It will go," he told her, quietly, as he strolled out.

"What are you two planning?" inquired Lorelei.



MAX MELCHER was a figure on Broadway; he had the entrée to all the stage-doors; he frequented the popular cafés.

"Nothing. Max drops in regularly; he used to be sweet on me." Lilas completed her make-up, then fidgeted nervously. "Gee!" she presently exclaimed, "I'm tired of this business. We're fools to stay in it. Think of Atlantic City on a night like this, or the mountains. This heat has completely unstrung me." She rummaged through the confusion on her table, then inquired of the dresser, "Croft, where are my white gloves?"

"They haven't come back from the cleaner's," Mrs. Croft answered.

"Not back? Then you didn't send them when I told you. You're getting altogether too shiftless, Croft. When I tell you to do a thing I want it done."

"I sent all six pairs—"

"You did nothing of the sort."

"Oh, Miss Lynn; I hope I drop dead if—"

"Don't talk back to me. You always have an excuse, haven't you?" Lilas's voice was strident; her face was dark with sudden anger. "I've a notion to box your ears—"

Lorelei broke in reprovingly. "Lilas! Croft is old enough to be your mother."

"Yes, and she's old enough to have some sense, but she hasn't got it."

"I hope I drop dead if—"

"I hope you do," snapped the indignant girl. "I told you to attend to them; now I've nothing but soiled ones."

The dresser began to weep silently. She was a small, timid old woman, upon whose manifest need of employment Lorelei had taken pity some time before. Her forgetfulness had long been a trial to both her employers.

"That's right; turn on the flood-gates," mocked Lilas. "You stop that sniveling or I'll give you something to cry for. I'm nervous enough to-night without having you in hysterics. Remember, if it ever happens again you'll go—and you'll take something with you to think about."

Seizing the cleanest pair of gloves at hand, she flung out of the room in a fine fury.

"You won't let her—fire me? I need work, I do," quavered Mrs. Croft.

"Now, now. Don't mind her temper. But you really ought to see to her gloves when—"

"I hope I drop dead this minute if I didn't send 'em out the very day she told me."

"Croft, you're fibbing. You know Lilas is excitable."

"Excitable?" Croft wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron. "Is that what you call it? How ever you can bear her I don't see, and you a nice girl. She won't do you no good, Miss Knight."

"Oh, pshaw! She was nervous."

"I should think she would be. I'll be glad if her millionaire takes her out of the business, like she thinks he will. Poor man! He's laying up trouble for himself, that he is. She'll land him in the divorce court—with her flesh-light photographs."

Lorelei swung around from her mirror. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I heard her and that Jew—I beg pardon, Miss Knight. You ain't a Jew, are you?"

"What about the flash-lights?"

"There's so many Hebrew girls in the profession— Not that I don't like 'em, you understand—"

"Go on."

"Well, I heard enough to know that she's up to some deviltry—her and that Maxey Melcher. They've got a photographer and witnesses. Your brother is one of 'em."

"Jim? What—"

"It's true. It's a bad crowd Mister Jim's in with. And there's something big in the air. Millions it is. And her saying she'll box my ears. The hussy! I've heard 'em talking before to-night."

"Tell me everything, Croft—quickly."

"I have. Only you better warn your brother—"

The assistant stage-manager thrust his head through the curtains, shouting: "Your cue, Miss Knight. What the devil—"

With a gasp Lorelei leaped to her feet and fled from the room.

Mrs. Croft shook her head mournfully, snuffled a few times, then scowled at the disarray Lilas had left behind. She breathed a feeble malediction upon the cause of it, seized a hat-pin, and, holding it like a dagger, thrust it viciously into first one, then another of the gowns hanging on their hooks.

"I wish you was in 'em," the little old woman exclaimed. She replaced the pin, then surreptitiously removed some expensive cologne from a large bottle, transferring the perfume to a smaller bottle which she took from her pocket, dabbed her nose with Lilas's powder-puff, and began laying out her enemy's next change of costume.

Lorelei had left a handful of silver carelessly exposed, and, discovering this, Mrs. Croft counted it. The pile was sufficiently large to reassure her, so she abstracted two quarters; then, in an excess of caution, returned one coin and took a dime in its place.

CHAPTER VI

LORELEI did not secure another word alone with the dresser until the middle of the second act, by which time Mrs. Croft was her own colorless, work-worn self once more.

"I don't know no more than I told you," she informed Lorelei. "Mr. Melcher has been coming here for a long time, and he always talks about Mr. Hammon. I've heard enough to know that him and her is after his money —millions of it. Mister Jim can tell you everything, for he's talked about it, too, when you were on the stage. Lilas mentioned him to-night when her and him was talking over the flesh-light photographs. She said— Oh, Gawd!—" Mrs. Croft broke off her narrative suddenly, and, falling to her knees in a prayerful attitude, began nervously arranging the long row of foot-gear under Miss Lynn's table. The next instant the owner herself burst into the room, panting from a swift run up the stairs.

"Quick, Croft! Don't be all thumbs, now." She tossed a sealed letter upon her table, rapidly unhooked her dress, and stepped out of it, then into a flame-colored velvet gown which the old woman held for her. She set a tremendous plumed hat upon her head, impaled it deftly, patted her hair into more becoming shape, and then seated herself, extending her feet for a change of slippers. She took the moment to open and read her note.

Lorelei looked up from her sewing at a little cry of rage from Lilas. Miss Lynn had torn the message into bits and flung it from her; her eyes were blazing.

"Damn him!" she cried, furiously, rising so abruptly as almost to upset Mrs. Croft. "The idiot!"

"What is it?"

"I—must telephone—quick." Half-way to the door she halted at Lorelei's warning:

"Wait; you haven't time."

"Damn!" repeated the elder girl. "I must; or—Lorelei, dear, will you do me a favor? Run down to the door and telephone for me? I won't be off again till the curtain, and that will be too late." Lorelei rose obediently. "That's a dear. Call Tony the Barber's place—I—I've forgotten the number—anyhow, you can find it, and ask for Max. Tell him it's off; he can't come."

"Who can't come? Max?"

"No. Just say, 'Lilas sends word that it's off; he can't come.' He'll understand. Run quick, or you won't catch him, and— He'll kill me if I let him go. I'll call him later, to-night— There's my cue now. Just ask for Max, and don't use his last name. Thanks. I'll do as much for you." Lilas was off with a rush, and Lorelei hastened after her, speculating vaguely as to the cause of all this anxiety.

The telephone at the back of the Circuit Theater was located inside the stage-door and occupied one end of the shelf which separated Mr. Regan's hole in the wall from the entrance-hall. It was no place in which to conduct a private conversation, since any one coming or going could hear, but stage telephones are not installed for the convenience of performers.

As Lorelei hurried down the passageway a man in evening dress turned, and she recognized Robert Wharton.

"You are sent from heaven!" he cried, at sight of her. "I enter out of the night and unburden my heart to this argus-eyed watchman, and, lo! you come flying in answer to my wish. Quick service, Judge. In appreciation of your telepathy I present you with some lumbago cure." He

tossed a bank-note to Regan, who snatched it eagerly on the fly.

Lorelei forestalled further words. "Please—I must tele phone. I go on in a minute."

"Fairy Princess, last night I was a goldfish; to-night I am an enchanted lover—"

"Wait; I'm in a hurry." She thumbed the telephone-book swiftly in search of her number, but young Wharton was not to be silenced.

"Tell him it's all off," he commanded. "You can't go; I won't let you. Promise." He laid a hand upon the telephone and eyed her gravely. "Don't thwart me—I'm a dangerous man. You can't use our little 'phone unless—"

"Don't be silly. I'm telephoning for some one else."

"That's exactly what we can't permit. The 'some one else' is here—I'm it."

"No, no!"

He closed one eye and wagged his head, grasping the instrument more firmly.

"Promise to tell him— It *is* a 'him,' isn't it? Aha! My intelligence is sublime. Promise."

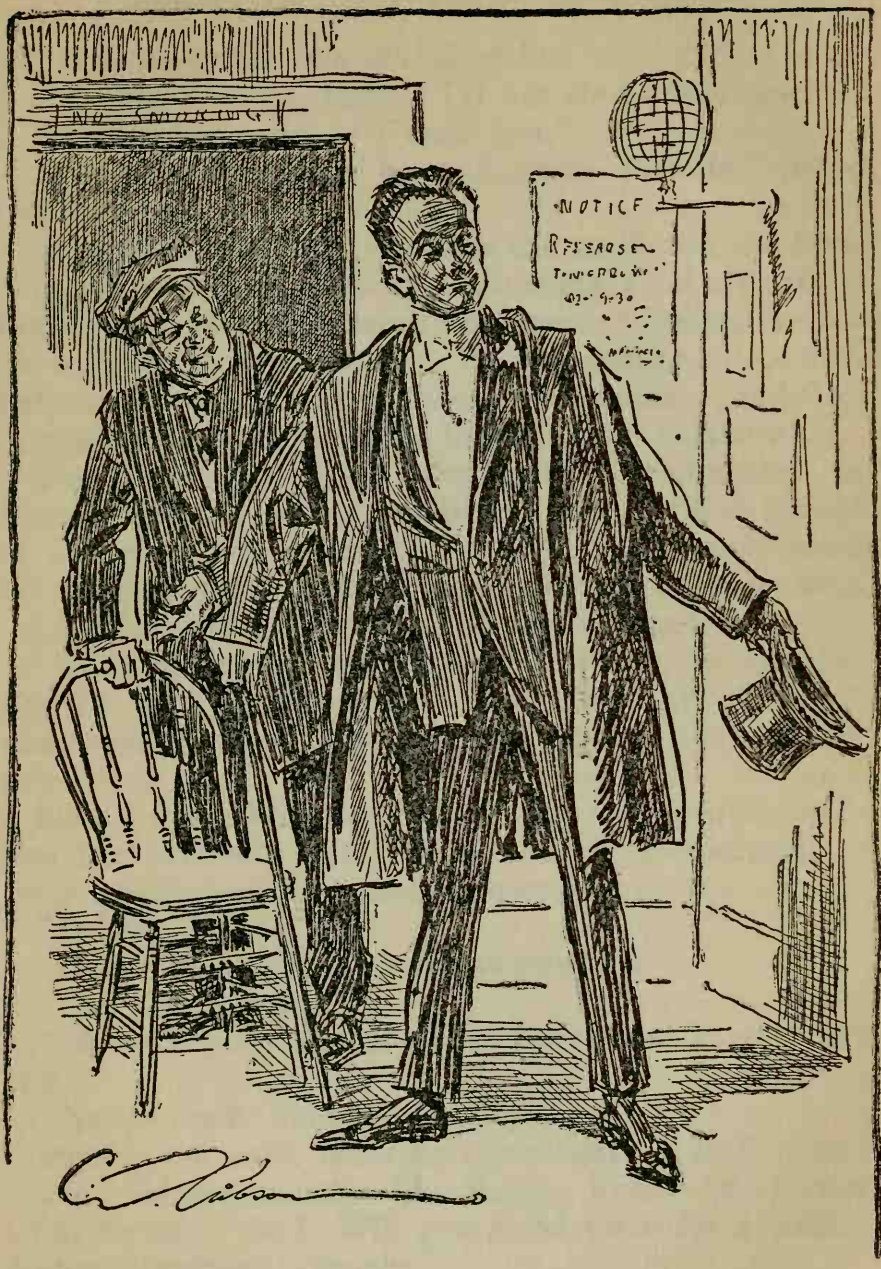
"I slapped you last night; I promise to do it again," Lorelei told him, sharply.

"Something whispered that you did, and all day long I have been angry; but to-night—now that I'm in my natural condition—I pass the insult. I offer you my hand and my other cheek in case you want to try a left hook. But I come with another purpose. Outside is a chariot with ninety horses—French rating—champing at the throttle. We are going away from here."

"You're drunk again, Mr. Wharton?"

He glanced at the clock over Regan's head and shook his head in negation. "It's only ten-twenty. In two hours from now—"

"Give me that 'phone."



"FAIRY PRINCESS, last night I was a goldfish; to-night I am an enchanted lover—"

"Promise to tell him it's all off."

She smiled. "All right. I'll use those very words."

Wharton hesitated. "I trust you."

"I'm going to tell him he can't come," she said, holding out her hand.

Once the instrument was hers she oscillated the hook with nervous finger, staring doubtfully at the cause of her delay. Wharton, as on the evening before, carried his intoxication with an air. He was steady on his feet, immaculate in dress, punctilious in demeanor; only his roving, reckless eye betrayed his unnatural exhilaration.

The Judge had enjoyed the scene. He chuckled; he clicked his loose false teeth like castanets. Bob turned at the sound and regarded him with benignant interest, his attention riveted upon the old man's dental infirmity.

"You're quite a comedian," Regan wheezed.

"Click 'em again," said Bob, pleasantly. "Wonderful! Age has its compensations. Play 'Home, Sweet Home' when you get 'em tuned up. Or perhaps they are for sale?"

Lorelei secured her number and was surprised to recognize her brother's voice. She made herself known, to Jim's equal amazement, and then inquired:

"Is Max there?"

"Sure. He's outside in the automobile."

"Call him, please."

"What do you want of him? How'd you know I was here?"

"Never mind. Call him quickly."

During the wait Wharton ejaculated: "Ha! 'Jim,' 'Max.' Men's names! Mr. Regan, kindly grind your teeth for me. No? Will you grind them for a dollar? Jealousy business. Thanks."

At last Melcher's voice came over the wire, and Lorelei recited her message. There was a moment of silence, then she explained how she came to be talking instead of Lilas.

He thanked her and she heard him muttering as he hung up. She turned to find her annoyer nodding with satisfaction.

"Splendid! I thank you; my father thanks you; my family thanks you. Now where would you like to dine?"

"How can a person get rid of you?" she inquired, stiffly.

"I'm sure I don't know—it isn't being done. But I'll try to think. Wear your prettiest gown, won't you? for I intend to enrage all the other fellows."

"This is an invitation, eh?"

"The first of a nightly series. Life is opening out for you in a wonderful manner, Miss Knight. Don't refuse; my legs have petrified, and a gang of safe-movers couldn't budge me."

She turned with a shrug of mingled annoyance and amusement, and he called after her:

"The Judge's teeth will entertain me till you come. I'll be waiting."

Miss Lynn, as she dressed after the performance, was still in an evil temper; but she thanked her room-mate for aiding her; then, as if some explanation were due, she added, "That note was from Jarvis."

"You puzzle me, Lilas," Lorelei told her, slowly. "I don't think you care for him at all."

Lilas laughed. "Why do you think that? I adore him, but we had an engagement and he broke it. Men are all selfish: the bigger they are the more selfish they become. They never do anything you don't make them."

"He can't sacrifice his business for you."

"Sacrifice! It's women who sacrifice themselves. D'you suppose any of those men we met last night would sacrifice himself for anything or anybody? Not much. They are the strong and the mighty. They got rich through robbery, and they're in the habit of taking whatever they want. They made their money out of the blood and suffering of thousands of poor people, so why—"

"Poor people don't buy steel."

"No; but they make it. I knew Mr. Wharton and the rest of them years ago, for I was born and raised in a furnace town. My father worked in a Bessemer plant—until he was killed. What I saw there made me an anarchist."

Through the open window overlooking the alley came a sound of singing; two voices raised in doubtful harmony, one loud and strong, the other rasping, hoarse, and uncertain.

Of all the girls that I adore,
There's none so sweet as Sa-a-a-hall-ee.

"Ouch! Who's that?" queried Lilas.

"Bob Wharton and the Judge. Wharton's waiting to take me to supper."

"Drunk, as usual, of course. Think of a fool like that with millions behind him—millions that his father wrung out of sweating, suffering foreigners like my father. He's squandering blood-money. That's what it is—blood-money."

"You *are* bitter to-night. Is Mr. Hammon living on blood-money, too?"

"Yes; he is."

"Is that why you're planning to blackmail it out of him?"

Lilas paused in her dressing and turned slowly, brows lifted. Her dark eyes met the blue ones unwaveringly.

"Blackmail? What are you talking about?" Mrs. Croft went pale, and retired swiftly but noiselessly into the lavatory, closing the door behind her. "What did Max tell you over the 'phone?" asked Lilas, sharply.

"Nothing."

"Then where did you get—that? From Jim?"

"Jim's pretty bad, I imagine, but he keeps his bad-

ness to himself. No. I've overheard you and Max talking."

"Nonsense. We've never mentioned such a thing. The idea is absurd. I get mad at Jarvis—he's enough to madden anybody—perhaps I'm jealous, but blackmail! Why, you're out of your head."

The girls had nearly finished dressing when a commotion sounded in the hall outside and Mrs. Croft, after investigation, reported that Robert Wharton had been forcibly expelled from a dressing-room. He could be heard gently apologizing and explaining that he was in quest of a Fairy Princess, whereupon Lorelei hastily locked her door.

"That's the worst of these swells," observed Lilas, as she left. "They pay high and go anywhere they please. Bergman caters to them."

Lorelei delayed her toilet purposely, and finally dismissed Croft; then she wrote a note to John Merkle, in care of his bank. By this time the cavernous regions at the rear of the theater were nearly deserted. She listened; but, hearing Wharton still in conversation with the watchman, she locked her door once more and sat down to wait. As she fingered the note a doubt formed in her mind—a doubt as to the advisability under any circumstances of leaving written evidence in another's hands. Finally she destroyed the missive, determining to make use of the telephone on the following day. As to just what to do after that she was undecided.

When quiet had finally descended she opened her door cautiously and peered out. Robert Wharton sat on the top step of the stairway near at hand, but his head rested against the wall, and he slept. Beside him were his high hat, his gloves, and his stick. As Lorelei, with skirts carefully gathered, tiptoed past him she saw suspended upon his gleaming white shirt-bosom what at first glance resembled a foreign decoration of some sort, but proved to

be Mr. Regan's false teeth. They were suspended by a ribbon that had once done duty in the costume of a coryphee; they rose and fell to the young man's gentle breathing.

Lorelei carried out her intention of telephoning on the following day, and about the close of the show that night Merkle's card was brought up to her dressing-room. A moment later Robert Wharton's followed, together with a tremendous box of long-stemmed roses. She went down a trifle apprehensively, for by this time the current tales of Bob's drunken freaks had given her cause to think somewhat seriously, and she feared an unpleasant encounter. More than once she had witnessed quarrels in the alleyway behind the Circuit, where pestiferous youths of Wharton's caliber were frequent visitors.

But Mr. Merkle relieved her mind by saying, "I sent Bob away on a pretext, although he swore you had an engagement with him."

"I'm glad you did. I left him asleep outside my dressing-room last night, and I almost hoped he'd caught pneumonia."

Beside the curb a heavy touring-car was purring, and into this Merkle helped his companion. "I'm not up on the etiquette of this sort of thing," he explained, "but I presume the proper procedure is supper. Where shall it be—Sherry's?"

Lorelei laughed. "You *are* inexperienced. The Johns never eat on Fifth Avenue, the lights are too dim. But why supper? You can't eat."

"A Welsh rarebit would be the death of me; lobsters are poison," he confessed; "but I've read that chorus-girls are carnivorous animals and seek their prey at midnight."

"Most of them would prefer bread and milk; anyhow, I would. But I'm not hungry, so let's ride—we can talk

better, and you're not the sort of man to be seen in public with one of Bergman's show-girls."

The banker acquiesced with alacrity. To his driver he said, "Take the Long Island road."

As the machine glided into noiseless motion Lorelei noted a limousine waiting near by, and saw a dim figure within. The dome-light had been turned off, and she could detect only a white shirt-front, the blurred outline of a face, and the glowing point of a cigar.

"You can follow that man's example if you wish," said she, "and hide until we're away from the bright lights."

Merkle answered shortly, "Your reputation may suffer, not mine." He leaned forward and inquired of the chauffeur, "Who's car is that?"

"Mr. Hammon's, sir. He's going our way, so his man said."

"I thought so. We'll have company."

"Why do you choose the Long Island road?" asked Lorelei.

"It's pleasant," responded Merkle. "I ride nearly every night, and I like the country. You see, I can't sleep unless I'm in motion. I get most of my rest in a car; there's something about the movement that soothes me."

"How funny!"

"Peculiar, perhaps, but scarcely humorous. I'd be dead or insane without an automobile. You see, I'm nothing but a rack of bones strung together with quivering nerves —always been so, and I'm getting worse. I keep four French cars in my garage, all specially built as to spring-suspension and upholstery, and I spend nearly every night in one or the other of them. It's seldom I do less than a hundred miles between midnight and morning; sometimes, when I'm bad, I do twice that. So long as I'm moving fast I manage to snatch a miserable sort of repose, but the instant we go slow I wake up. It's the sensation

of flight, the music of a swift-running motor, the wind blowing in my face, that lulls me; but it's getting harder all the time. I used to sleep at twenty miles an hour; now I can't relax under thirty. Forty is fine—sixty means dreamless peace."

"It does, indeed, if one happens to have a blowout," laughed the girl.

"I have trouble keeping chauffeurs. The darkness breaks their nerve, and they play out in two or three months. I've known them to crack under the strain in a week, and yet all the time I want to go faster—faster. Some night, when a bolt breaks, or my driver's eye and hand fail to co-ordinate, it will all end, I suppose, in a twinkling, and—I'll get a good rest at last. Meanwhile I thank Heaven and Mr. Vanderbilt for the Motor Parkway."

The car had threaded the after-theater congestion of traffic with a swiftness that testified to the practised hand on the wheel, and was now darting through unfrequented side-streets where the asphalt lay in the shaddows like dark pools. Up the approach to the Queensborough Bridge it swept, and took the long incline like a soaring bird. Overhead, the massive towers pierced the night sky; the steel-ribbed skeleton-tunnel rushed past the riders; far beneath, the river itself lay like a sheet of metal, glittering here and there with the yellow lights of ships. Blackwell's Island slipped under them, an inky bottomless pit of despair, out of which points of fire gleamed upward—like faint, steady-burning sparks of hope in the hearts of miserable men. The breath of the overheated city changed as by magic, and the thin-faced sufferer at Lorelei's side drank it in eagerly. Even in the dim flash of the passing illuminations she noted how tired and worn he was, and a sudden pity smote her.

"Won't you pretend I'm not here, and drive just as you always do? I won't mind," she said.

"My dear, it's late. You'll need to get home."

"No, no."

"Really?" His eagerness was genuine. "Won't your people worry?"

Her answer was a short, mirthless laugh that made him glance at her curiously. "They know I'm perfectly safe. It's the other way round: a man of your standing takes chances by being alone with a woman of—mine."

"Which reminds me of Miss Lynn and Mr. Hammon. You've decided to accept my offer?"

"No. I can't be a hired spy."

"You said over the 'phone that you had learned something."

"I have. I believe there is an effort on foot to get some of Mr. Hammon's money dishonestly. I have a reason for wishing to prevent it."

"I knew I wasn't mistaken in you," smiled Merkle.

"Oh, don't attribute my actions to any high moral motives! I'm getting a little rusty on right and wrong. Personally, I have no sympathy with Mr. Hammon, and I don't imagine he acquired all of his tremendous fortune in a perfectly honorable way. Besides, he's a married man."

"It isn't alone Jarvis or his family or their money that is concerned," Merkle said, gravely. "Great financial institutions sometimes rest on foundations as slight as one man's personality—one man's reputation for moral integrity. A breath of suspicion of any sort at the wrong time may bring on a crash involving innocent people.

"Hammon at this moment carries a tremendous top-heavy burden of responsibilities; his death would be no more disastrous than a scandal that would tend to destroy public confidence in him as a man."

"Doesn't he know that himself?"

"Perhaps. But his infatuation overtook him at an age when a man is a fool. Young men are always objects of

"SACRIFICE! It's women who sacrifice themselves. sacrifice himself for anything or anybody?"

D'you suppose any of those men we met last night would

suspicion in the financial world, for their emotions are unruly; but when old men fall in love they are superbly heedless of consequences. I promised to tell you something about Jarvis, and I will, since you spoke of his married life. To begin with, his father and his father's father were steel-workers. They came from Cornwall before he was born, and Jarvis grew up in the glare of the Pennsylvania furnaces. From the time he could walk he never knew anything, never heard anything except steel. He inherited all the driving strength of his father and developed such a remarkable business ability that he became a rolling-mill superintendent almost before he was of age. They say he never did less than two men's work and often more; but he could make others work, too, and there lay the secret of his success. He was indefatigable; he was a machine; he never rested, nor played, nor relaxed, as other men do. He just worked; and his mill held the tonnage record for years.

"When the Corporation was formed he played a big part in the deal and got a big slice of the profits. He had been successful, noted: at one turn of the wheel he became enormously wealthy. The story of Alladin is nothing to the story of the men who took part in that combination. Hammon went into other things than steel, and he prospered. He never failed at anything. Now, here comes the part of the story that interests me most of all and will interest you if you can understand the workings of a man's mind. Jarvis had no vices and but one hobby—at least his vices were neutral, for he had never taken time to acquire the positive kind. His hobby was Napoleon Bonaparte. He read everything there was to read about Napoleon; he studied his life and patterned his own on similar lines. His collection of Napoleona is the finest in this country; he is an authority on French history of that period — in fact, he's as nearly hipped on the subject as a man of his powers can be con-

sidered hipped on anything. Do I bore you, Miss Knight?"

"No; go on. I'm tremendously interested."

"Well, naturally, Hammon began to consider himself another Napoleon, and his accomplishments were in a way quite as wonderful; his strategy was quite as brilliant, and his victories quite as complete. He even confided to me once that his idol surpassed him in only one respect—namely, the power to relax—a pardonable conceit, under the circumstances. Jarvis had never taken time for relaxation, and he was beginning to wear out; and so—he deliberately set about learning to play. The Emperor of France, so history tells us, took his greatest pleasure in the company of women; therefore Hammon sought women, just as he had sought and gained financial conquest. He doesn't know the taste of defeat; so the result was foreordained."

"But surely he thought something of his family," protested Lorelei. "Didn't he consider them?"

"I fancy he wasn't well acquainted with his family. I'm sure he never enjoyed any home life, as we understand it. He lived with a rich old woman who bore his name but scarcely knew him; his daughters were grown women whom he saw on rare occasions and whose extravagant whims he gratified without question. But there was little real intimacy, little sympathy. Remember, Jarvis had been a boy, but he had never been young, and this was his first taste of youth. But—he was not Napoleon. As you've noticed, he's quite mad on the Lynn woman. He's no longer himself. He has been drugged by her charms, and—now he's paying the price. I wanted you to know the story before we went any further. Now tell me what you have learned."

CHAPTER VII

BY the time Lorelei had completed her recital of those occurrences that had excited her suspicions the car was rolling out the roads leading toward the Long Island plains, and, with head-lights ablaze, was defying all speed laws. Other vehicles on their way home to the fashionable estates of Wheatley Hills, Hempstead, and the South Shore were overhauled and left behind. The big machine had begun its long night-song, and it flashed over the rises or dipped into the swales with the gliding ease of movement characteristic of an aeroplane. It went with almost the silence of a phantom—only the sustained murmur of the motor, the whisper of the whirling tires as they parted from the road surface, the rush of the night wind pouring past, came to the ears of the passengers. These softly rhythmic sounds, combined with the swaying of the deep cushions, were decidedly restful, and had there been nothing to challenge her sight Lorelei felt that she, too, might have been soothed as Merkle was. But she was fascinated, hypnotized by the gleaming tunnel of light into which she was being hurled. The blazing panorama of fence, forest, and hedge that took dim shape out of the blackness grew, rushed at her, then leaped away into oblivion, dazzled her too much for relaxation. Merkle, however, had drawn the conversation-shield rearward, and in its shelter leaned back with eyes closed. He seemed asleep, but after a time he spoke abruptly:

"Melcher is a shrewd man. He wouldn't tackle a blackmailing job of this size without protection; otherwise I

could put him out of the way very quickly. I dare say Miss Lynn, herself, doesn't know who is behind him."

"Why don't you warn Mr. Hammon at once?"

Merkle rolled his head loosely. "You don't know the man. His self-reliance is so monumental, his scorn of opposition is so deep, that he would laugh at the idea of a plot against him. Then, too, he's mad about the woman, and he'd probably tell her everything I said. After all, we have only our suspicions to go upon."

Merkle dozed again, half buried in the cushions. They had passed Jamaica; the country lay dark and silent on every side save for a dim-lit window here and there. The car was eating the miles in a flight as swift and undeviating as that of an arrow; but it was not until it had swept into the Motor Parkway that the girl fully understood what her host termed fast driving.

Then it was that the chauffeur let the machine out. Over the deserted plains it tore, comet-like, a meteor preceded by a streamer of light. It swung to the banked curves with no slackening of momentum; it devoured the tangents hungrily; the night wind roared past, drowning all other sounds. Crouched immovably in his seat, the driver scanned the causeway that leaped into view and vanished beneath the wheels, like a tremendous ribbon whirling upon spools. Merkle lay back inertly, lolling and swaying to the side-thrust of the cushions; but Lorelei found her fists clenched and her muscles hard with the nervous strain. Finally she pushed the shield forward, and, leaning over the front seat, stared at the tiny dash-light. The finger of the speedometer oscillated gently over the figure sixty, and she dropped back with a gasp. They had been running thus for a long time.

Merkle roused to say, "Is this too fast for you, Miss Knight?"

She laughed nervously. "N-no. I'm sorry I woke you."

After a moment he startled her by inquiring, "Why don't you marry Bob Wharton?"

She tore her eyes from the reeling shadows in front and peered at him.

"What makes you think I like him well enough?"

"I don't. But he's the sort you're looking for, isn't he?"

She nodded. "I can't expect to—marry a decent man. I've learned that much."

There was a pause, and then, "It would be a great pity," he said.

"You're not complimentary. Perhaps I'm not so bad as I appear."

"I didn't mean that. It would be too bad, on your account. I—like you. Maybe it's your beauty that has gone to my head; no man could remain quite sane in your company." He turned his tired, bright eyes upon her, and Lorelei stirred uncomfortably. "You're quite different to what I first thought you."

"Oh no! I'm exactly what you thought. I've seen Mr. Wharton only twice."

"He's crazy about you. He acts wholly upon impulse, of course. It ought to be easy."

Merkle inquired the time of his chauffeur, then directed him to turn homeward along the North Shore.

"I sha'n't be selfish and keep you out any longer, Miss Knight," he said. "If you don't mind I'll doze on the way in, and try to figure out the next move in this Hammon affair."

The return trip was another hurtling rush through the night, in a silence broken only by Merkle's demand for more speed whenever the machine slackened its labor. The miles wheeled past; the Sound lay to the right.

They were sweeping over a rolling North Shore road when suddenly out of the blackness ahead blazed two blinding headlights. With startling abruptness they appeared over the crest of a rise; Merkle's driver swung to

the right. But the road was narrow; a trolley track was under construction, and along the edge of the amasite was strewn a row of steel rails, guarded by occasional red lanterns. The strange car held to its course; there was a blast of horns, a dazzling instant of intense illumination, then a crash as the inside mud-guards met. Merkle's car seemed to leap into the air; there was a report of an exploding tire; Lorelei felt a sickening sense of insecurity, and found herself hanging, bruised and breathless, across the back of the driving-seat. The automobile was bucking and bumping, as if the pavement had been turned into a corduroy road; then it came to a pause, half in the ditch. Merkle was jammed into an awkward coil on the floor of the tonneau, but raised himself, swearing softly. The other car held to its course, and whizzed onward, leaving in its wake a drunken shout of mockery and defiance.

The catastrophe had taken but an instant. The three were alone, and their machine disabled almost in a breath. Merkle inquired anxiously if Lorelei were hurt; the chauffeur ran after the offending car, yelling anathemas into the night. He returned slowly, mopping his face, which had been cut by fragments from the shattered windshield.

"Joy-riders," he muttered. "They wouldn't give way, and threw me into those rails."

"Narrow shave, that. I wonder we weren't all killed." Merkle eyed the car's crumpled mud-guard and running-board, then directed his driver to ascertain the extent of the damage. The motor was still throbbing, but a brief examination disclosed a broken steering-knuckle and a bent axle in addition to an injured wheel.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Knight; but I'll have to send for another car," apologized Merkle.

"Is this splendid machine ruined?"

He shrugged. "That's the curse of these roads. Somebody is always driving recklessly." Lorelei smiled at mem-

ory of the miles they had covered so swiftly; but she saw that he was serious and in a sour temper. "One risks his life on the whim of some drunken idiot the moment he enters a motor-car. Now for a telephone." A terse question to his man served to fix their location.

"We're not far from the Château," Merkle interpreted the answer. "That place is always open, so if you don't mind the walk we'll go ahead. It will take an hour to get one of my other machines, but meanwhile we can have a bite to eat." At her cheerful acceptance his tone changed.

"You're all right. Some women would be hysterical after such a shake-up. I swear, I think I feel it more than you. If you were a man I'd like to have you for a chum."

Together they set out through the starlight, leaving the chauffeur with instructions to secure help from the nearest garage; and as they followed the dim road Merkle continued to apologize until Lorelei silenced him. Both were beginning to suffer from the reaction of their fright.

It was very late; there was little sign of habitation, for the road led through a wooded country. Before long, however, they came in sight of lights, which Merkle hailed with relief.

The Château was a quasi-roadhouse of some architectural dignity, widely advertised as being under the same management as one of the smart Broadway cafés, and supplying the same food and drink, at twice the Broadway price. Its service was unsurpassed by any city restaurant, and, being within an hour's run by motor, it received a liberal patronage. Tips were large at the Château; its hospitality was famous among those who could afford the extravagance of midnight entertainment; and yet it was a quiet place. No echo of what occurred within its walls ever reached the outside world. Sea-food,

waffles, privacy, and discretion were its recognized specialties, and people came for miles—mainly in pairs—to enjoy them.

As the pedestrians neared the avenue of maples leading up to the house they espied in the road ahead of them first the dull red glow of a tail-light, then a dusty license plate.

"There's luck," Merkle ejaculated. "I'll rent this car."

In the gloom several figures were standing, facing in the direction of the Château, and when Merkle spoke they wheeled as if startled.

"No, you can't hire this machine. What do you think this is, a cab-stand?" answered a gruff voice.

"Jim!" cried Lorelei, and ran forward.

Her breathless amazement at the meeting was no greater than her brother's. "Sis! What the devil are you doing here?" he managed to say. One of the men who had been kneeling over a case of some sort, dimly outlined in the radiance of a side-light, rose and placed his burden in the tonneau.

"I'm ready," he announced.

Young Knight showed some nervousness and apprehension—emotions which his companions, judging by their alert watchfulness, fully shared. Jim seized his sister by the arm and led her aside.

"How the deuce did *you* get here—and who is this guy?" He jerked his head toward Merkle.

Lorelei introduced her companion and made known the cause of their present plight.

"Humph!" grunted Jim. "What d'you suppose ma 'll say to this—you out all night with a man?"

"What are *you* doing? Who are those people?" she retorted.

"Never mind. But say—I don't like the looks of this affair."

For a second time Merkle appealed to Jim. "If you

can't take your sister home I'll have to telephone for another car."

Jim's tone was disagreeable as he replied: "You two don't look as if you'd been wrecked. Where's your driver?" Merkle's fist clenched; he muttered something, at which Jim laughed harshly.

"Now don't get sore," said the latter; "I'm not going to make trouble, only I want to know where you've been."

A bare-headed man came running across the lawn and flung himself into the waiting automobile. One of Jim's companions called his name sharply.

"Will you take me home?" his sister implored.

"Can't do it. I'll see you later, and you, too, Merkle." His last words, delivered as he swung himself upon the running-board of the car, sounded like a threat; a moment later, and the machine had disappeared into the night.

"Hm-m! Your brother has a suspicious mind," Merkle said. "I hope he won't make you any trouble."

"He can't make trouble for *me*." Lorelei's emphasis on the last word made her meaning clear; her companion shrugged:

"Then there's no harm done, I assure you."

They turned in upon the driveway, walking silently, then as they neared the Château they became aware of an unusual commotion in progress there. Men were running from stable to garage, others were scouring the grounds; from the open door came a voice pitched high in anger. The speaker was evidently beside himself with wrath. He was shouting orders to scurrying attendants, and abusing the manager, who hovered near him in a frantic but futile effort at pacification.

The enraged person proved to be Jarvis Hammon. He was hatless, purple-faced, shaken with combative fury. At first the two new-comers thought he was dangerously drunk, but, as they mounted to the tiled terrace which served as an outdoor eating-place they saw their mistake.

Recognizing Merkle, Hammon's manner changed instantly.

"John!" he cried. "By God! you're just in time."

"What's happened?"

"Blackmail, or worse. I hardly know, myself. These ruffians put up something on me—they're all in it, even the manager."

The latter, a sleek Frenchman with ferocious mustaches and frightened eyes, wrung his hands in supplication.

"M'sieu 'Ammon," he bleated, "you ruin me. Soch accusation is terrible. But wait. Calmness. The man will be caught."

"Caught, hell!" roared the steel magnate. "You know who he is. Give him to me. How did he get in here if you didn't know him? How did he get his camera fixed without your knowledge? I'll have your scalp for this. I'll close this place and the city place, too." A uniformed doorman appeared with a smoking lantern in his hand, and Hammon wheeled upon him. "Well? Did vou find him?"

"We can't find nobody. There was a car outside the grounds, but it's gone now."

Merkle interposed. "Will you tell me what has happened?"

"It is terrible, incredible, M'sieu," wailed the manager.

"Same old story, John. I came out here for a quiet supper with—a lady. I've been coming here regularly. They got us into a private room, then took a flash-light, and—there you are. I made a rush for the waiter as soon as I realized what had occurred, but he'd skipped. Everybody's skipped, photographer and all. Nobody knows anything. Blamedest bunch of idiots I ever saw." He ground his teeth.

Lorelei, who had remained in the background, turned suddenly sick at memory of that mysterious party at the gate; she understood now the significance of the man with

the box and of the fleeing figure that had come through the darkness.

The terrified manager continued his heartbroken lament, and Hammon seemed about to destroy him when Merkle drew the latter aside, speaking in an undertone.

Hammon listened briefly, then broke out:

"Nonsense. I'd stake my life on her. Why, she's prostrated. It's either pure blackmail, or it's my wife's work. She's had detectives on me for some time." Merkle murmured something more. "Oh, come now! I know what I'm talking about, and I won't stand for that," cried Hammon.

Merkle shrugged; his next words were audible, and they were both sharp and incisive.

"The harm's done. They got away clean. Now we've got to kill the story and kill it quick in case they intend it for the papers."

"My God! Newspapers—at this time," groaned the other. "It couldn't be worse."

"Right. We must move fast. Is your car here?"

"Yes."

"Get it. We'll go in with you. I had an accident to mine."

"You'll see for yourself that you're wrong—about the other." Hammon jerked his head meaningly toward the house, then strode away to order his motor.

Merkle favored his young companion with a wintry smile.

"It seems we're too late."

Lorelei nodded silently. "Don't tell him who—spoke to us out there. Not yet, at least. I—can't see *him* go to jail."

"Jail? There won't be any jail to this—there never is. Jarvis will have to settle for the sake of the rest of us."

Hammon's limousine rolled in under the porte-cochère, and a moment later the owner appeared with Lilas.

Lorelei stared at her friend in genuine surprise, for it was obvious that Lilas was deeply agitated. Her face was swollen with weeping; she verged upon hysteria. No sooner were the four in the car and under way than she broke down, sobbing wretchedly.

"It's all my fault. I might have known he was up to something; but I didn't think he'd dare—" she managed to say.

"He? Who?" Merkle asked her.

"Max Melcher. This is his doing."

"What makes you think so?"

"He as much as told me. If I hadn't been a fool I'd have guessed, but he— Oh, I could kill myself!" She burst into strangling sobs and hysteric laughter.

"Why did you let him come to the dressing-room?" Lorelei inquired.

"He's been doing it for years. I've always—known him. We were—engaged."

Hammon verified this. "That's right. They were engaged when I met her. She didn't know the sort of ruffian he is till I proved it. She's afraid of him, and he knows it."

"I tried to break with him, but he wouldn't let me, and I've *had* to be nice to him. He'd have me murdered if I—"

"Rot!" Merkle exclaimed, testily.

"Rot, eh?" Jarvis answered. "He's done as much, more than once; but he's so powerful that nobody can get him. He's the king of his ward; he keeps a gang of gunmen on the East Side, and he's the worst thug in the city."

Lilas substantiated this, giving further details as to Melcher's reputation, and then broke down again, weeping with such miserable abandon that Lorelei for the first time began to doubt her own previous convictions. It seemed incredible that such emotion could be counterfeit, and Lilas's plausible explanations did indeed make it

"My dear, I never saw a king—outside of a pinochle deck.

You never really believed that king stuff, did you?"

appear that Melcher was the resentful victim of an infatuation. Lorelei cast a troubled glance at Merkle and found that he, too, gave signs of uncertainty.

Hammon soothed his charmer in his clumsy, elephantine way, showing that, despite Merkle's recent insinuations, he still trusted her. "This is the only woman who ever cared for me, John," he explained, after some hesitation, "and we're going to stick together. We have no secrets."

"Your little Fifth Avenue establishment rather complicates matters, doesn't it? What are you going to do about that?" Merkle inquired.

"This thing—to-night—is likely to settle the matter for me. You know the kind of home life I've led for twenty years, and you know I wouldn't regret any change. When a man goes ahead and his wife stands still the right and wrong of what either chooses to do is hard to settle. At any rate, it has ceased to concern me. I want a few years of happiness and companionship before I die. I'm selfish—I'll pay the price."

They rode on in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Lorelei awoke on the following afternoon her first inquiry was for Jim; but he had not come home, and her mother knew nothing of his whereabouts. Lorelei ate her breakfast in silence; then, in reply to a question, accounted for the lateness of her arrival by saying that she had dined with Mr. Merkle.

At the name Mrs. Knight pricked up her ears; vulture-like, she undertook to pick out of her daughter all that had occurred, down to the most insignificant detail. Lorelei had always made a confidant of her mother in such cases, even to the repetition of whole conversations; but this time the latter's inquisitiveness grated on her, and she answered the questions put to her grudgingly. Just why she felt resentful she scarcely knew. Certainly she had no interest in Mr. Merkle, nor suffered the least embarrassment over their exploit. Rather, on this afternoon, she beheld with unusual clarity her present general life, and that of her family, feeling more keenly than usual the utter sordidness of their whole scheme of existence. Unwelcome thoughts of this sort had come of late, and would not be banished. Once she had made a pet of a magpie, but the bird's habits had forced her to dispose of it. She remembered the way it forever pried into things; how nothing was safe from that sharp beak and inquisitive eye. Its waking hours had been busied in a tireless, furtive search for forbidden objects. Now she could not help likening her mother to the bird, although the thought shocked her. There was the same sly angle of counte-

nance, a similar furtiveness of purpose; the very expression of Mrs. Knight's keen, hard eyes was like nothing so much as that of the magpie's. Displeased at her own irritation, Lorelei made the excuse of a shopping trip to escape from the house.

At the nearest news-stand she bought the afternoon papers, and was relieved to find no mention of the incidents of the night before. It appeared that Hammon and Merkle had succeeded in their attempt to suppress the story—if, indeed, there had ever been any intention of making it public.

Looking back upon last night's homeward ride, she was wholly at a loss. In view of Jim's words and of what she had gathered at the theater she had felt sure of Lilas's complete knowledge of the blackmail plot, but Hammon's unwavering faith in the girl and Lilas's own story of her relations with Max Melcher had awakened a doubt. If Lilas had told the whole truth, and if she really cared for Hammon, the affair, despite its clandestine nature, would bear a more favorable construction, and Lorelei could not entirely withhold her sympathy from the offending pair. Of the two Hammon was the more blameworthy; but his domestic unhappiness in a measure canceled his guilt—so, at least, said the code under which Lorelei lived. What concerned her far more than the moral complexion of the liaison, was her brother's connection with the unlawful scheme of extortion. Jim, she saw, had gone wrong with a vengeance, and the consequences to him troubled her, for in spite of all that he might be or do she cherished a sisterly affection for him. Family ties were very real and very strong to her—strong enough to keep her loyal to her kin even after the demoralizing change in her whole mode of life. The firmest, in fact, the only bond that she had ever known, was that of blood; obedience, faithfulness, and affection had been born in her, and she never thought to question their sacredness.

Idling down Fifth Avenue, she found herself in front of a fashionable department store. A knot of curious people were gaping at a unique automobile which stood in the line of vehicles along the curb, and she paused to look. The equipage was snow-white in color; its upholstery was of soft, white leather; the chauffeur and a stiff-backed footman were in blood-red with white facings on their livery. Upon their left sleeves was worked the gold monogram "A. D." In their caps both men wore cockades that resembled shaving-brushes. A tiny mop of a lap-dog, imprisoned within the closed body of the car, was barking frenziedly at the throng. He was an animated bundle of cotton, with shoe-button eyes sewed into one end. As for the car itself, Lorelei decided it to be a combination of every absurd tradition of the coach-builder's art. Across the doors, in gold letters an inch high, was the name "Adorée Demorest."

As she entered the store Lorelei reflected with some disgust that no visiting Rajah, no barbaric potentate—no one, in fact, except a self-advertised musical-comedy queen—would so flagrantly defy good taste as to ride in such a vehicle.

She was engaged in her final purchase when a dazzling creature in red and white descended upon her with exclamations of surprise and delight. It was Mademoiselle Demorest herself, and her greeting was so effusive that the stream of shoppers halted in the aisle. Mademoiselle Demorest wore a gown of a style that proved her taste in dress as individual as her choice of motor-cars. A war-like head-decoration of aigrette feathers burst into spray above her right ear; the wrists of her white gloves bore her monogram worked in gold-thread to match those that ornamented the livery of her servants. A heavy string of white-coral beads, the size of cherries, was looped about her neck, and she carried the mate to the excitable poodle that defied the curiosity-seekers outside. All in

all, she was a figure to awaken interest in the nightly performance at the Palace Garden, and to cause men customers to forget their change.

"Miss Knight! I'm *so* glad to see you again," she burbled. "How *sweet* you look!" The poodle pawed frantically and yelped a shrill appreciation of the meeting. "I hoped we'd meet again; but where *have* you been? I— Hush, François! Shake hands with the lady, there's a dear." François squirmed violently and snapped at a small boy whose mother had pushed forward to stare at the notorious beauty.

Lorelei laughed. "How well he minds!"

"He hates children—they excite him."

The woman with the child turned to a companion, exclaiming audibly: "Those are the King's rubies—see! Ain't they nice and white?"

A fat matron beside Lorelei elbowed her way forward; in one hand she carried a pair of embroidered silk stockings, with the other she raised a lorgnette. After a measured scrutiny her lips tightened, her nose lifted, she blew loudly like a porpoise, and, gathering her skirts closely, waddled away, as if fleeing from contagion. She continued to clutch the hosiery until a floor-walker, in answer to the clerk's frantic signal, intercepted her. Another crowd promptly gathered to listen to her indignant denial of guilt.

"Have you finished your shopping?" Adorée inquired. "Then do come and help me match some rose du Barry. I've no more eye for color than François. Pink is just another shade of blue to me."

"Gee! He's alive, all right," piped the small boy, whose eyes were glued upon the poodle. "Ma, what does a live dog cost?"

Lorelei felt herself flushing uncomfortably under the stares of the onlookers, and, glad to escape, she moved away beside the undisturbed cause of all the furore.

Miss Demorest seemed genuinely delighted at this encounter. She clung to her companion, chattering vivaciously; then, when the rose du Barry had been matched, she suggested tea.

"We'll run right over to the Waldorf—my car is outside." But Lorelei declined, explaining lamely that she did not care for public places.

"Really?"

"Really. People point out one—and I get enough of that."

The dancer's expression and tone changed abruptly. "I supposed you were like all the others."

"Well, I'm not. When I'm away from the theater I try to forget it. I—hate the business."

The reply, which came with sincere feeling, widened Lorelei's eyes with uncontrollable surprise.

"Here, too," said Adorée Demorest, quietly. "But I'm not allowed to forget it. Our first meeting made me think you were—out with banners. I was hired on that occasion to be naughty. What do you say to some real tea at my house? Just you and I?"

Lorelei's heart sank at thought of that gaudy machine outside, but there was an honest appeal in the speaker's eyes, and, moreover, the memory of her own obligation rose to prevent her from appearing ungrateful. "I'd be delighted," she falsified, and, gurgling with appreciation, Miss Demorest hurried her toward the nearest exit. In the street, however, Adorée paused, and her next words showed that she was not wanting in womanly intuition.

"I sha'n't inflict you with a ride in that circus-wagon. It's all right for me, but—you're one of the decent kind. If you have a reputation it won't do to parade it in a show-case. We'll take a taxi." Lorelei's relief must have been obvious, for Adorée sped swiftly to the corner, then was back again without the dog. "If there's anything more conspicuous than a blonde with a white poodle,"

she explained, "it's two blondes with two poodles." Then she flung herself into the cab and slammed the door.

"You must think I'm very rude," her guest ventured.

"Nothing of the sort. I know just how you feel." Miss Demorest's smile was a trifle strained. "Only—I'm awfully lonesome, and—I'll take care that nobody sees us."

"Now I *know* I've been nasty." Lorelei felt her embarrassment growing, for this woman differed entirely from what she had expected. Underneath the dancer's extravagant theatricalism she appeared natural and unaffected. Adorée changed the current of the conversation by saying:

"I hope those bloodhounds get to fighing."

"Don't you like them?"

"Hate 'em! I'd use 'em to scrub the windshield if I had my way."

"Why—aren't they yours?"

"Oh, I suppose so; as much as that rubber-tired igloo is mine. They're my props, like the two British Peers on the box. Gee! I'd like to stick chewing-gum in the side-whiskers of the tall one—the one with the cramps in his elbows. His name's Riley, and he gets nine dollars a week for looking like that. A man's board bill isn't particular how it's made nowadays."

"How—*funny!*" Lorelei was eying the speaker with undisguised curiosity. "You're not a Frenchwoman?"

"Agnes Smith is the name. Decent by descent, but an actress by advertising. What's *your* game?"

"Um-m—My nose is straight; I don't limp; so I'm an actress by force of feature."

"Married?"

"Hardly."

"Want to be?"

"Got to be."

Both girls laughed unaffectedly.

"I like you," said the dancer. "Do you mind if I get out of this cast-iron corset and into a kimono when we get home?"

"Have you a spare one?"

"Dozens; but they're not very clean."

"That's lovely. And let's make the tea weak."

"Oh, I can't drink anything strong! I'm an awful counterfeit."

"I'm beginning to think so. I—wonder if I'm dreaming."

The girls had much in common; they chattered continuously through the short ride, and when they alighted from the taxi-cab they disputed over the right to pay for it. When the guest was ushered into Adorée's apartment she received another surprise, for the place was neither elaborate nor showy. It consisted merely of two large, comfortable rooms overlooking a side-street lined with monotonous brown-stone boarding-houses which for the most part were inhabited by doctors, dressmakers, and semi-professional people.

A battered tea-kettle was set to boil over an absurd alcohol-stove that required expert assistance to maintain its equilibrium. Adorée flung out of her finery and donned a Japanese robe, offering another to Lorelei. A plate of limber crackers was unearthed from somewhere, also the disreputable remains of a box of marshmallows; and these latter Madamoiselle Demorest toasted on a hat-pin.

"You're the most extraordinary person," her guest at length remarked. "Aren't you going to show me your jewels or—anything like that?"

"You probably have better jewels of your own," carelessly replied Adorée; then she voiced a very tame and womanly oath as a marshmallow dripped into the flames. "Pickles! I spoiled that one."

"But the Cabachon rubies are real."

"Sure. So is the 'square toe' who brings 'em and takes

'em away; so is the bond that covers 'em. Lordy, but they *are* pretty!"

"Then the King didn't give them to you?"

"My dear, I never saw a king—outside of a pinochle deck. If I lost one of those rubies the Maiden Lane Shylock who owns them would tear enough curled hair out of his beard to fill a mattress. You never really believed that King stuff, did you?"

"Why, yes."

"I had no idea it worked so well." Again Miss Demorest smiled crookedly. "No wonder you didn't want to go to the Waldorf with me; I wonder you consented to come here."

"Your advance work is great—"

"I knew the public swallowed it; but I supposed the profession knew press stuff when they saw it. I sang and danced for ten years in this country and never got better time than the schützen parks and air-domes—seven shows a day and a change of act each week. I was Agnes Smith then. Somehow I got the price of a ticket to England, and I figured the music-halls would rave over a good kid imitation; but, bless you, I starved! I was closed the first place I played—got the hook. I ate Nabiscos till I got another date, then I pulled the air-dome stuff that had scored in Little Rock and Michigan City, and it got by somehow. My mother was a Canuck, so I knew some French, and eventually I reached the Continent. There I met the Old Nick. You may think the devil is a tall, dark man with the ace of spades on his chin and a figure-six tail—that's what he looks like on the ham-cans; but in reality he's a little fat, bald man with a tenor voice, and he eats cloves. His name is Aubrey Lane, and he can't stand hot weather. Never heard of him, eh? Well, neither had anybody else until I met him. He was in Paris selling patent garters at the time. He saw me work at a cabaret and told me I was good, but not good enough.

I'd known that for years, so he didn't hurt my feelings. He confessed that he was tired of working and intended to have me make a lot of money for him, but warned me that he had expensive tastes and I'd have to pay well for the privilege. He was right; I did. But here I am in electric lights on Broadway while he is exercising a wheeled chair at Atlantic City."

"He's your manager?"

"He is that very little thing. He told me I could sing until my back ached and never get anywhere because I lacked brains. Then he offered to make me a star if I'd allow him to hitch his chariot to me—on a share of the gross. There was one trifling sacrifice I had to make in the nature of my personal reputation—so he told me. He said I'd have to be the best or else the worst actress in the world in order to land big and support him in the luxury he craved. I couldn't hope to be the best, so he made me the worst. He began by tying a can to the 'Agnes Smith,' and handed me 'Adorée Demorest' instead; then he went to work. He really did work, too, although it nearly killed him, and he's never done anything since. I forgot to mention that I signed a contract with him which lawyers tell me is the finest example of air-tight, time, weather, and water proof construction that has been seen since the Declaration of Independence. It fits closer than a rubber shirt, always retains its shape, lasts longer than old age, and—no metal can touch you. The King fable is a joke on the other side, but New York swallowed it clear up to the sinker, and Aubrey gaffed the Palace Garden management for a three years' contract. Of course, my advertised salary is phony, just like the rubies and the wrecked throne and that gilded bandwagon with the poodles and the stuffed supers on the box. Aubrey owns them all except the rubies, which he rents. I'm billed as the most notorious woman in America, and the shred of reputation I have left wouldn't make a neck-

tie for a gnat, whereas in reality I love marshmallows and tea much more than men. But I'm a star, at the head of my own company, and playing to sidewalk prices. Do you think it was a good bargain?"

Lorelei had listened with breathless interest. Now she burst out impulsively:

"You poor dear."

Miss Smith smiled, but her eyes were tragic.

"Sometimes I cry when I think about it. I—cry a good deal," said she. "I didn't realize until too late what it meant, but, you see, I was tired of working, tired of ambition, and I wanted to come home. Thank God I have no people! I save all the money I can, and when I get enough I'm going to take Agnes Smith out of the moth-balls, dust her off tenderly, and go to raising ducks."

"Ducks? What do you mean?"

"What I say. That has always been my ambition."

"Why not quit now?"

"What's the use? I'm half-way through the swamp; the mud is as deep behind as it is in front. But I'm deathly afraid all the time that I'll be found out—I'd—rather be notorious than ridiculous. Of course, Aubrey sees to that."

"Are you fond of him?"

Adorée turned up her nose. "He's a little pink rabbit. I don't like any man, and I never have. There's only one I'd really care to meet; his name is Campbell Pope."

"The critic. He *is* nice."

"The beast. Did you read what he said about me? I'll never rest until I have a lock of his hair that I've plucked myself. I'd love to have his whole scalp—with say, one ear attached—hanging on my bureau where I could see it every morning when I wake up. Somehow I don't seem to mind the press stuff that Aubrey puts out, but Pope—actually *believes* what he wrote. And other

people will believe it, too. I—I—Gosh! I'm going to cry again."

Lorelei nodded in perfect sympathy; she did not laugh. "I haven't any girl chum; let's be friends," said she.

Adorée had been nibbling at marshmallows as she talked; as she wiped her eyes now she left a smear of powdered sugar on her cheek.

"I'd love to—I'm simply bursting to confide in somebody—but we couldn't go around together."

"Why? I don't care what people think."

"You can't afford to be reckless. We're each playing our own game and chasing the dollar in our own way. The men you met would make life unbearable for you if they knew we were pals. Aubrey was right: a girl must either be mighty good or mighty bad in this business—or make people think she is, which amounts to the same thing. You have had easy going because you're known to be straight; but if you ever get into the papers watch what will happen. You'll have to fight. You wouldn't like that kind of fighting, either, and—I'm not sure you could stand it."

As Lorelei walked homeward that afternoon she felt an unaccustomed warmth in her breast, and realized that she, too, had been very lonely in the city. The certainty that she had made a friend gladdened her heart. She looked forward with a thrill to the morrow when she could see Adorée again.

During her absence Jim had returned and departed; but a note was waiting for her. It had been brought by a messenger, and read:

"Things look bad. I'm afraid we'll be implicated, too. Better see your brother quickly. M."

"YOU'RE a strange brother," she said. "I hardly know instinct in you, Jim?"

what to make of you. Has the city killed every decent

CHAPTER IX

LORELEI was not a little mystified by Merkle's cryptic message, for she could imagine no possible way in which she or the writer himself could be connected discreditably with Jarvis Hammon's affair. She gained some light, however, when that evening she read the note to Lilas.

"Why, they're going to blackmail Merkle, too," Lilas exclaimed. "Well, they'd be foolish to let him off, wouldn't they? Two millionaires out with two show-girls! Hilarious foursome at the Château! Automobile wreck! Foxy Pinkertons and flash-light photographs! Nice story."

"So they think he'll pay to keep his name out of the papers?"

"Exactly. And he will—for your sake."

"I won't let him."

Lilas was surprised. "Why? He's rich. He wouldn't miss a few thousand."

"You wouldn't allow Mr. Hammon to be robbed, would you?"

"Oh, wouldn't I? If he didn't care enough for me to protect me from scandal I'd want to know it."

"Lilas, you puzzle me," confessed Lorelei, doubtfully. "You say things that make me think you don't care for him at all; then again you seem to be crazy about him. How *do* you feel? How far would you go with him?"

Lilas laughed airily. "Perhaps I'd go farther *with* him than *for* him. He asked me to marry him if his wife

gets a divorce; and I agreed. Does that answer your question?"

"I—suppose it does."

"Now that he has come to the point, I'm not sorry things happened just as they did. A woman must look out for herself—no man will ever help her. It's worth some notoriety to become Mrs. Jarvis Hammon."

Something in the speaker's words rang false; but just what that something was, Lorelei could not decide.

"Then you'd like to see the story made public?" she queried.

"Naturally."

"I dare say if I loved a man I'd want him at any price, but I—hope I'm not going to be dragged into this matter."

"My dear, New York has blackmailing newspapers, just as it has blackmailing men. They live off people like Merkle. You'd be foolish to let him escape from this just to save a few dollars, for the notoriety will injure you, where it benefits me. It's not often that girls in our business know men like those two. You have a family; they can make Merkle do the right thing by you."

"I don't want him to do anything," protested Lorelei. "There's nothing to do."

"You could make him marry you."

Lorelei winced. "Nonsense! I don't care for him. He's an old man. There's no reason why he should."

"He could be made to pay, at least, and you'll be sorry if you don't get something out of him. Just wait and see what a difference the story makes with your other men friends."

During the ensuing performance Lorelei pondered her friend's disquieting prophecy; yet she could see no reason for grave apprehension. Publicity of the kind threatened would, of course, be disagreeable; but how it could seriously affect her was not apparent.

Later in the evening Robert Wharton appeared, as

usual, and so resentful was he at the deceptions previously practised upon him that Lorelei with difficulty escaped a scene. He declared positively that he was not to be discouraged; that he proposed to have his attentions accepted at any cost, even if it became necessary to use force. He seemed sufficiently drunk to execute his threat, and his invitation to supper was couched this time more in the terms of a command. At last he borrowed a stool from the Judge, who by now was his willing vassal, and planted himself in the hallway, where he remained throughout the performance—a gloomy, watchful figure. Lorelei came down boldly, dressed for the street, and, since she could not pass the besieger, excused herself briefly. Descending the basement stairs, she crossed under the stage, made her way into the orchestra-pit, and managed to leave the theater by the front door.

She was waiting when Jim came home, and followed him into his room, where they could talk without disturbing their father. Lorelei made her accusation boldly, prepared for the usual burst of anger, but Jim listened patiently until she paused.

"I knew you had to spill this, so I let you rave," said he. "But it's too late; somebody has been after Hammon for a long time, and he's been got—yes, and got good. Take a flash at *The Chorus-girl's Bible.*" He tossed his sister a copy of a prominent theatrical paper. "I waited until it came out."

Lorelei gasped, for on the front page glared black-typed head-lines of the Hammon scandal. John Merkle's name was there, too and linked with it, her own.

"Jim!" she cried aghast. "They promised to kill the story."

"Humph! Charley Murphy himself couldn't kill that."

"What is—*this?*" She ran her eye swiftly down the column.

"Sure. Melcher commenced suit against Hammon this

afternoon. Fifty thousand dollars for alienation of Lilas's affections. Joke, eh? He claims there was a common-law marriage and he'll get the coin."

"But Mrs. Hammon?"

"The evidence is in her hands already—dates, places, photographs, everything. She'll win her suit, too."

"Why, it sounds like a—a deliberate plot. But I don't understand who's behind it. What part did you have in it, Jim? Were you helping Mr. Melcher in his blackmail scheme, or—" Another possibility came to her— "Were you by any chance working for Mrs. Hammon?"

Divining his sister's prejudice, Jim lied promptly and convincingly. "Why, Mrs. Hammon, of course. I had a chance to turn a few dollars, and I took it."

"But why did they drag me in? Couldn't you keep me out of it? This is dreadful." As she ran her eye over the article she saw that it was quite in harmony with the general tone and policy of the paper which catered to the jaded throngs of the Tenderloin. Truth had been cunningly distorted; flippancy, sensationalism, and a salacious double meaning ran through it all.

"What's dreadful about it?" inquired her brother. "That sort of advertising does a show-girl good. You've got to make people talk about you, Sis, and this 'll bring a gang of high-rollers your way. You've been so blamed proper that nobody's interested in you any more."

For a moment Lorelei scrutinized her brother in silence, taken aback at his outrageous philosophy. Jim had changed greatly, she mused; not until very lately had she observed the full measure of the change in him. He was no longer the country boy, the playmate and confidant of her youth, but a man, sophisticated, hard, secretive. He had been thoroughly Manhattanized, she perceived, and he was as foreign to her as a stranger. She shook her head hopelessly.

"You're a strange brother," she said. "I hardly know

what to make of you. Has the city killed every decent instinct in you, Jim?"

"Now don't begin on the Old Home stuff," he replied, testily. "I haven't changed any more than you have. Why, ma used to think you'd play dead or jump through whenever she snapped her finger, but—you're getting tough-bitted. You're getting sanctimonious in your old age. Where you got it from I don't know—not from ma, surely, nor from dad; he's a cheater and always has been."

"*Jim!*"

"Oh, you know it. I'm wondering—how long you'll stand pat."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you really intend to marry a bunch of coin?"

"That's the program, isn't it? I've been raised for that, and nothing else."

"Well, ma can't put it over, so I guess it's up to me. Just leave things to Brother Jim, and don't worry over what happens. Nobody along Broadway pays any attention to this rot." He indicated the newspaper with a wave of his cigar. After a moment he added, "Would you accept Merkle?"

Lorelei shivered. "Oh—no! Not Mr. Merkle."

"Why not? He's all right, and he won't last long."

"The idea is— Ugh! He wouldn't ask me, and I sha'n't allow you to use this scandal to—urge him. The proposition sounds all right in the abstract—marriage, money, comfort, everything I want—but when it comes right down to the point—I—always balk."

"Humph! You ought to consider the rest of us a little bit. Pa could be cured, ma'd be happy. I could get on my feet. How about Bob Wharton?"

"He's a drunkard."

"Good Lord, you don't expect to grab a divinity student, do you? That kind never has anything."

"Let's not talk about it, please. Mr. Wharton is getting nasty, and—I'm beginning to be afraid of him."

"I'll bet you could land him—"

"Please. I—don't want to think about it. I dare say I'll bring myself to marry some rich man some day; but—Merkle—Wharton—" She shuddered for a second time. "If Mr. Wharton is serious this scandal will scare him off, or else he'll become—just like the others. I could cry. He threatened me to-night; I don't know how I'll manage to avoid him to-morrow night."

"Hm-m! He's coming that strong, eh?" was Jim's interested query; but on hearing his sister's account of the young millionaire's determined pursuit he volunteered in his offhand way to assist her.

"I'll come for you myself, and we'll whip over to a café for supper."

"You'll save me from him," said Lorelei, with a wan smile, "and I'll know that you are in good company for one evening at least."

"Don't lose any sleep over my habits," he told her, lightly; "and don't worry yourself about this newspaper story, either. Melcher is in the right, for Hammon cut him out with Lilas. He's after Merkle, too; so you'll have to stand the gaff this time. I'll look up this chap Wharton to-morrow and find out what sort of a farmer's son he really is."

As Jim and his mother breakfasted together on the following morning he broached the subject of his recent conversation with Lorelei.

"She's sore about the story," he said. "We had a long talk last night."

"I knew she would be, and I'm not sure it was a good thing."

"We'll drag something out of it if you do your part. Merkle will pay. Don't mention money—nothing but marriage—understand? Outraged motherhood, ruined

daughter, blasted career—that's yours. I'll be the brother who's in the position of a father to her. I can threaten, but you mustn't. Goldberg will close for us."

"I don't see why we have to divide with a lawyer, when it's our affair and we can handle it ourselves," his mother complained.

"I tell you it's got to go through the regular channels. This was Melcher's idea, and, since I'm in on the Hammon money, Max is entitled to his bit of this. Gee! If she'd only told us she was going out with Merkle we might have framed something worth while—I don't mind telling you this is a pretty weak case."

"He won't stand publicity; they never do," averred Mrs. Knight.

"Oh, he's not like Hammon; he hasn't got a family—and Lorelei won't back us up, either. We've got to bluff it through."

"Wouldn't he marry her?"

"Not a chance. In the first place, she wouldn't have him. Bob Wharton is the white hope."

"She hates him, too. Goodness knows what we're going to do with her."

"I think she'll stand for Wharton if we work her right; it's him or nobody. She's getting harder to handle every day, though, and one of these times she'll fall for some rummy. If she ever does lose her head she'll skid for the ditch, and we can kiss ourselves good-by. She'll be as easy to steer as a wild boar by the tail. I guess you're sorry now that you didn't listen to me and let Max handle her before she got wise."

"I wouldn't feel safe with any of that crowd. I'd be terribly afraid." Mrs. Knight shook her head dubiously.

"Say! She's got you doing it, too. Why, they don't take a chance. Goldberg handles the legal end, and his brother is in the legislature. But that's not all: Melcher's partner in his gambling-house is Inspector Snell. You

can't beat that. I could have Merkle killed for five hundred bucks and never stand a pinch. I'd merely tip one of Maxey's gunmen, and some night Old Dyspepsia Dick would wake up with a harp in his hand. They'd get him coming out of his bank or going to his club or leaving the theater; and nobody would dream who did it, for there wouldn't be a motive. It's done every day, ma. Even if they grabbed one of the boys, Melcher would spring him from the Tombs. 'Alibi' is Maxey's middle name, and he *makes* bondsmen. How do you suppose politics are run in this town, anyhow?"

"That isn't politics; that's murder." Mrs. Knight was deeply shocked. "This is a terrible city, Jim."

"Sure; but Max is in politics for the protection it gives him in his other lines of business. His gambling-house is as safe as a church. There's big money in this banker-hunting, too. Did you read about the two old guys at the King William Hotel last month? Well, Max laid 'em against two squabs, friends of Tony's. He got the girls into the hotel, paid their bills, and all that. They've cleaned up about twenty thousand so far. Of course, Lorelei won't stand for anything like that, so we've got to marry her, I suppose."

"Just the same, I'm frightened—and this isn't honest. I wish she would listen to Robert Wharton."

James winked meaningly. "Leave that to me. She's going to Proctor's with me to-night. Maybe he'll join us. But meanwhile we've got Merkle for some quick money if we work him right. I'm off for Goldy's office now. I'll meet you at three."

When Jim reappeared, dressed for the street, he gave a bit of parting advice:

"Better lay on the hysterics when she wakes up. It 'll make it easier for me to-night."

Lorelei found her mother visibly upset by the story in the morning's newspaper.

"You told me you only went to supper with that man," Mrs. Knight cried, tragically. "Instead of that you two were off in the country together all night. Here's the whole thing." She brandished the paper dramatically.

"Well, I told you a fib. But there's no harm done."

"Harm, indeed? You're ruined. I never read anything more disgraceful; I daren't show it to Peter—it would kill him. What *ever* possessed you, after the way we've watched over you, after the care we've taken of you? It's terrible."

"Please don't carry on so. It was too bad, of course, but—I'll live through it."

The shock of this callous assertion seemed to rob Mrs. Knight of speech; she stared at her daughter in grief and amazement.

"Mr. Merkle is a gentleman," Lorelei defended. "He'll regret this publicity as much as I."

"The wretch! I'll teach him to spoil an innocent girl's career and drag her name in the mud." Mrs. Knight glared balefully.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said her daughter, sharply.

"He—ought to marry you."

"Why, mother! You're more insulting than that newspaper. The career of a show-girl is something of a joke." Lorelei undertook to laugh, but the attempt failed rather dismally.

"Indeed. What will the other men say? You had a character; nobody could say a word against you until now. Do you think any decent man would marry a girl who did a thing like this? Of course, I know you're a good girl, but *they* don't, and they'll believe absolutely the worst. You've spoiled everything, my dear; I'm completely discouraged." Mrs. Knight began to weep in a weak, heart-broken manner, expecting Lorelei to melt, as usual; but, seeing something in her daughter's expression that warned

her not to carry her reproaches too far, she broke out: "You're *so* hard, *so* unreasonable. Don't you see I'm frantic with worry? You're all we have, and—and the thought of an injury to your prospects nearly kills me. You misunderstand everything I say. I—*wish* you were safely married and out of danger. I think I could die happy then. It means so much to all of us to have you settled right away. Peter is failing every day; Jim is going to the dogs, and—I'm sick over it all."

"I wish I *were* married and out of the way. You would all be fixed, at least. I—don't much care about myself." Lorelei sighed in hopeless weariness of spirit, for variations of this scene had been common of late, and they always filled her with the blackest pessimism.

"Maybe Mr. Merkle—"

"We'll leave him out of this," declared Lorelei; "he's too decent to have a person like me foisted upon him—and there's no reason whatever why he should be held responsible for my notoriety." She turned away from the dining-room with a shudder of distaste. "I don't want any breakfast. I think I'll get some air."

As soon as she was out in the street she turned southward involuntarily, and set off toward the establishment of Adorée Demorest.

Mrs. Knight dried her eyes and began to dress herself carefully, preparatory to a journey into the Wall Street section of the city, for the hour was drawing on toward three o'clock.

Meanwhile Jim, having transacted his business at Goldberg's office, sought a more familiar haunt on one of the side-streets among the forties. Here, just off Broadway, was a famous barber-shop—a spotless place with white interior and tiled walls. Six Italians in stiff duck coats practised their arts at a row of well-equipped chairs. A wasp-waisted girl sat at the manicure-table next the front windows. As Jim entered she was holding the hand of

a jaded person in a light-gray suit, and murmuring over it with an occasional upward glance from a pair of bold dark eyes.

"Tony the Barber's" place was thoroughly antiseptic. Dirt was a stranger there; germs found life within its portals a hazardous business—what with the vitrified walls, the glass shelves, and enameled plumbing. Even the towels were handled with tongs; the nickel-plated steamer in which they were heated to an unbearable temperature seemed to puff its cheeks with a consciousness of painful and almost offensive cleanliness. The men who worked here had hard, black eyes, but their hands were soft and white. The rows of mugs that stood inside the glass cupboards were inscribed with the names of prominent actors, managers, and booking-agents of the Rialto—for this was a famous place in its way.

Tony, engaged in administering a shampoo, nodded at Jim, and from force of habit murmured politely:

"Next!" Then, with a meaning glance, he indicated a door at the rear of the shop. In the third chair Jim recognized Max Melcher, although the face of the sporting-man was swathed in steaming cloths.

Jim passed on and into a rear room, where he found three men seated at a felt-covered card-table. They were well dressed, quiet persons—one a bookmaker whom the racing laws had reduced from affluence to comparative penury; another, a tall, pallid youth with bulging eyes. The third occupant of the room was an ex-lightweight champion of the ring, Young Sullivan, by name. His trim waist and powerful shoulders betokened his trade. His jaw was firm, and a cauliflower ear overhung his collar like a fungus.

Jim drew up a chair and chatted idly until the bookmaker yawned, rose, and went out. Then Jim and the others relaxed.

"Gee, he's a sticker!" exclaimed the pugilist. "I thought he'd broke his back."

"Max is getting his map greased," the pop-eyed youth explained. Taking a pasteboard box from his pocket, he removed a heroin tablet therefrom and crushed it; the powder he held in the indentation between the base of his closed thumb and first finger, known as "the thimble"; then, with a quick inhalation, he drew the drug up his nostrils. "Have an angel?" he inquired, offering the box.

Jim accepted, but Young Sullivan declined.

"What's the news?" the latter inquired.

"I've seen Goldy," replied Jim. "Mother and I will call on Merkle at three. I finally got her to consent."

Sullivan shook his head. "He *might* fall, but I doubt it. How does your sister feel?"

"That's the trouble. She's square, and we can't use her," Jim explained.

"Some doll!" admiringly commented Armistead, the third member of the group. Armistead had once been famed in vaudeville for dancing, but the drug habit had destroyed his endurance, and with it his career. "She's a perfect thirty-six, all right. She could rip a lot of coin loose if she tried."

At this moment Mr. Melcher, freshly perfumed and talcumed, entered the room. His white hair was arranged with scrupulous nicety; his pink face, as unwrinkled as his immaculate attire, was beaming with good humor.

"Well, boys, I'm the pay-car," he smiled.

"Hammon came through, eh?" Sullivan inquired, eagerly.

"Not exactly; we compromised. Quick sales and small profits; that's business."

"How strong did he go?" queried Armistead.

"Now, what's the difference, so long as you get yours? Photography is a paying business." Melcher laughed agreeably.

"Sure! I'll bet Sarony is rich." Young Sullivan care-

lessly accepted the roll of currency which Melcher tossed him, and the others did likewise.

"I suppose that's curtain for us," Jim said, regretfully.

"It is. The rest is Lilas's affair."

"Say, will the old man fall *again?*" queried Armistead.

"He's going to marry her!" The three others stared at him in amazement. "Right!" confirmed Melcher. "She's got a strangle hold on him."

"Hm-m! Maybe we haven't lost the last car yet," Sullivan ventured.

Jim seconded the thought. "She's got an ace buried somewhere. There's a lot more in her head than hair-pins. I wish Merkle would marry my sister."

"Not a chance," Melcher declared. "You'll be lucky to shake him down for a few thousand. How about Wharton? Will she stand for him?"

Jim frowned, and his voice was rough as he replied:

"I'll *make* her stand for him—if it's a marry."

"He's a lush; if you got him stewed he might go that far. It has been done; but, of course, it's all up to the girl. Anyhow, if he balks at the altar we might get him for something else."

"I'm not sure I'll need any help in this." Jim looked up coldly. "If he marries her, that ends it; if we have to frame him, of course I'll split."

"How are you going to frame him, with a square dame like Lorelei?" asked Armistead.

"Frame both of them," Melcher said, shortly. "By the way, he's a gambler, too, isn't he? Bring him in some night, Jim, and I'll turn for him myself."

"Save his cuff-buttons for me," laughed Young Sullivan, idly riffling the cards. "Gee! Money comes easy to some folks. Don't you guys *never* expect to do any honest work?"

CHAPTER X

JIM'S appearance when he entered the dressing-room that night was a surprise; he was clad in faultless evening attire.

"Why the barbaric splendor?" inquired Lorelei. "Don't you know I'm only your sister?"

"I've *got* these Moe Levys, so I might as well wear 'em. I'm tired of running a moth-garage," he replied, laying aside his stick, gloves, and hat with a care that betrayed his unfamiliarity with them. "What have you got to go with this scenery?"

"Do you want me to dress, too?"

"Sure thing. Look your best, and make me think I'm a regular John."

"Bergman dropped in to see me to-night," she told him, after they had gossiped for a moment. "He referred to that story in this morning's *Despatch*."

"Yes?"

"I don't like the way he talked."

"Fresh?"

"He's always that, but this time he was something more. He thinks he owns the girls who work for him."

Jim replied, carelessly: "Blow him and his job. You can get on at the Palace Garden."

"There's my contract: he can discharge me, you know, but I can't quit—that's one of the peculiarities of a theatrical contract. Well—he insisted on taking me to supper."

"A brother is a handy thing, once in a while, but for every-day use, you need a 'steady' with a kick in each mit."

"I wish *you* would punch him."

"Who? Me? And go joy-riding with a square-toe? Nix. I'm too refined. Did you see to-night's papers?"

"There wasn't much in them."

Jim smiled wisely. "There would have been if things hadn't gone right. I'm glad for your sake."

"Oh, the harm's done, I suppose. But there's one good thing about it—Bob Wharton hasn't bothered me this evening."

Jim, with an expressionless face, turned to speak to Lilas Lynn, who had just come in. When his sister came down after the last act, he was waiting at the door and helped her into a cab, despite her protestations that she would much prefer to walk.

"What are you going to do with all the coin you save? Slip it to the shoemakers?" he laughed. "I don't go out often; you'd better spring me good."

As they seated themselves in the main room at Proctor's he appraised her with admiring eyes. "You're the candy, Sis. There's class to that lay-out."

"It's part of the game to look well in public, but I'd have enjoyed myself more if we had gone to Billy the Oysterman's and dressed the part." She surveyed the gaudy dining-room with its towering marble columns, its tremendous crystal festoons showering a brilliant but becoming light upon the throngs below, then nodded here and there to casual greetings.

Proctor's was a show-place, built upon the site of a former resort the fame of which had been nation-wide; but the crowds that frequented it now were of a different type to those that had gathered in "the old Proctor's." Nowadays the customers were largely visitors to the city in whom the spirit of Bohemianism was entirely lacking. The new resort was too splendid for the old-time atmosphere. Magnificent panels done by a gifted artist were set into the walls and distant ceiling; an elaborate

marble stairway rose from the street-level to the hall itself, but instead of extending an air of cheerful welcome it seemed to yawn hungrily for the occupants of the place, rudely inviting them to descend when they had sufficiently admired the costly furnishings. A superb orchestra was playing, hordes of waiters hovered about the serving-tables and sped noiselessly along the carpeted spaces between the dining-tables; but, despite the lights and the music, it was evident that the servitors outnumbered the guests. Nominally high wages were offset by the various deceptions open to an ingenious management; prices were higher here than elsewhere; the coat-rooms were robbers' dens infested by Italian mafiosi; tips were extravagant and amounted in effect to ransom; and each meal-check was headed by an illegible scrawl which masked an item termed "service." The figure opposite would have covered the cost of a repast at Childs's. But New York dearly loves to be pillaged; it cherishes a reputation for princely carelessness of expenditure. It follows that freedom from extortion in places of entertainment argues a want of popularity, than which nothing can be more distressing to contemplate. Nothing speeds the Manhattan sleep-hater more swiftly to a change of scene than the knowledge that he is getting his money's worth.

"Speaking of clothes," Jim continued, staring past his sister to another table, "there seems to be a strike-breaker in the room. Pipe the gink with the night-shirt under his coat, and the shoe-string tie. There must be a masquerade— Say! He's bowing to *you*."

"Hush! It's Campbell Pope, the critic."

Mr. Pope had risen and was slouching toward them. He took Lorelei's hand, then shot a sharp glance at her escort as the girl introduced them. Accepting Jim's mumbled invitation, he seated himself and instructed a waiter to bring his coffee. Jim continued to eye him with poorly concealed amusement, until Pope led him into con-

versation, whereupon the youth began to take in the fact that his guest's intelligence and appearance were entirely out of harmony. Wisely, Jim sheltered himself behind an assumption of pleasantry he was far from feeling. He also watched the nearest entrance with some anxiety, for the reviewer's presence did not fit well with his plans. As he finished ordering he heard Pope say:

"I was sorry the story got out, Miss Knight; but it was pretty well smothered in this evening's papers. Of course, you were dragged in by the hair to afford a Roman spectacle: we all saw what it meant when it came to us."

"What did it mean?" queried Jim, with brotherly interest.

"Blackmail. The word was written all over it. Melcher's connection with the affair was proof of that; then—the way it was handled! Nobody touched it except the *Despatch*, and, of course, it got its price."

"I thought newspapers paid for copy," innocently commented Jim.

"Yes, real newspapers; but the gang had to publish the stuff somewhere. It is reported that Hammon paid fifty thousand dollars to prevent Melcher from filing suit. I dare say things will be quiet around Tony the Barber's now."

"You press people certainly have got a lot up your sleeves." James's involuntary start of dismay did not pass unnoticed. He did not relish the gleam in Pope's eyes, and he hastily sought refuge in a goblet of water, notwithstanding his distaste for the liquid.

"We sometimes know as much as the police, and we invariably tell more," continued Pope. "Yes, a business man can get a hair-cut in Tony's without fear of family complications now. I suppose Armistead is smoking hop; young Sullivan is probably laying an alcoholic foundation for a wife-beating, and—the others are spending Hammon's money in the cafés."

Jimmy Knight paled, for behind Pope's genial smile were both mockery and contempt; a panic swept him lest this fellow should acquaint Lorelei with the truth. Jim lost interest in his clams and thereafter avoided conversation with the wariness of a fox.

He was still glowing with resentment when Robert Wharton paused at the table and greeted its occupants cheerily. In response to Jim's invitation Bob drew up a fourth chair, seated himself, and began to beam upon Lorelei. Noting the faint line of annoyance between her brows, he laughed.

"Retreat is cut off," he announced, complacently; "escape is hopeless. I've left orders to have the windows barred and the doors walled up."

"Eh? What's the idea?" inquired Pope.

Wharton answered sadly: "My vanity has suffered the rudest jolt of its young career; I mourn the death of a perfectly normal and healthy self-conceit, age twenty-nine. Services at noon; friends and relatives only."

"Oho! You've heard the seductive song of the Rhine maiden?" Pope's eyes were twinkling.

"Eh?—I'm tangled up like a basket of ticker-tape. You see, Campbell, I drink; candor compells me to acknowledge that much. In a moment of folly I was indiscreet, and ever since I have been trying to apologize. I have borne garlands of roses, offers of devotion, plaintive invitations to dine, but—the Circuit is a trick theater and it has a thousand doors. All I have to show for my efforts at reparation is a bad cold, a worse temper, and a set of false teeth which the doorman pledged with me for a loan of ten dollars. I have Mr. Regan's dental frieze in my bureau-drawer—but they only grin at me in derision. In short, I'm in Dutch, and there sits the adorable cause of my sorrows."

In spite of Wharton's reproachful tone, the gaze he bent upon Lorelei was good-humored, and she saw that

he was in a mood different to any she had ever seen him in. Strange to say, he was sober, or nearly so, and he was plainly determined to make her like him.

"Has he annoyed you, Miss Knight?" asked Pope.

"Dreadfully."

Wharton explained further. "The first time we met I deserved to be slapped, and I was. You see, I was ruder than usual. But I have sobered up purposely to apologize; I have repented, and—well, here we are, thanks to brother James."

"Thanks to—Jim?" Lorelei raised her brows.

Pope turned to young Knight and said, politely, "That is my foot you are stamping on."

Ignoring Jim's mute appeal, Wharton ran on smilingly: "He promised to shackle you to a table until I could stammer out my halting apologies, and now that I've done so in the presence of press and public won't you forgive me and help me to bury the hatchet in a Welsh rarebit?" He was speaking directly to her with a genuine appeal in his handsome eyes. Now that she saw him in his right mind, it was unexpectedly hard to resist him, for he was very boyish and friendly—quite unlike the person who had so grievously offended her.

When she and Jim had first entered the restaurant they had received a polite but casual recognition from the head waiter, whose duty it was to know all the stage favorites; but there attentions had ceased. With Wharton as a member of the party, however, there came a change. The head waiter himself hustled forward and, catching Lorelei's eye, signaled her with an appreciative droop of the lid. Her arrangement with Proctor's was of long standing, and her percentage was fixed, but this time she did not respond to the sign. Mr. Proctor himself paused momentarily at the table and rested a hand upon Wharton's shoulder while he voiced a few platitudes. Then in some inexplicable manner Robert found himself

not only ordering for himself, but supplementing Jim's *menu* with rare and expensive viands. As a great favor, he was advised of a newly imported vintage wine which the proprietor had secured for his own use; if Mr. Wharton wished to try it the steward would appeal directly to Mr. Proctor and secure the keys as a personal favor. Nothing like this wine had been seen in New York for years, possibly in a lifetime; it was an opportunity, and Mr. Proctor was eager to accommodate those who really knew wines. A visiting prince had offered him a fabulous price for the remaining bottles, but he had refused. To partake of this vintage was almost like drinking up the sunshine; darkness, complete and eternal, would follow when this precious shipment was exhausted.

Of course Mr. Wharton wished to sample such a vintage, any vintage, in fact, since a thousand fires were consuming him, and his nerves were on edge from the night before. The first draught electrified him, his spirits rose and he swept his companions along with his enthusiasm. From surrounding tables people accosted him; men paused in passing to exchange a word about stocks, polo, scandal, Newport, tennis, Tuxedo; none were in the least stiff or formal, and all expressed in one way or another their admiration for Lorelei. Women whom she knew were not of her world beamed and smiled at the young millionaire. It was a new experience for the girl, who felt herself, as the supper progressed, becoming conspicuous without the usual disagreeable accompaniments. Men no longer openly ogled her; women did not nudge each other and whisper; her presence in company with a member of the idolized rich was causing gossip, but gossip of a flattering kind.

All this attention, however, had quite the contrary effect upon Campbell Pope. Much to Jim's relief, he excused himself shortly, whereupon the former, after allowing Wharton to pay the score, suggested a dance, breezily

sweeping aside his sister's mild objection. Of course, Bob was delighted, and soon the trio had set out upon a round of the dancing-cafés.

At the first place they visited they had difficulty in gaining entrance, for a crowd was held in check by the heavy plush cord stretched across the door to the restaurant proper; but here again Wharton's name proved potent. The barrier was lowered, and the party managed to squeeze their way into a badly ventilated Turkish room, where a demented darky orchestra was drumming upon various instruments ranging in resonance from a piano to a collection of kitchen utensils. Tables had been crowded around the walls and into the balcony so closely that the occupants rubbed shoulders, but the center of the lower floor was occupied by a roped corral in which a mass of dancers were revolving like a herd of milling cattle. Dusty, tobacco-smoked oriental rugs, banners and lanterns, suspended from walls and balcony railings, lent a semblance of "color" to the place; little Moorish alcoves were set into the walls, in and out of which undersized waiters dodged like rabbits in a warren. The attendants were irritable; they perspired freely, they bumped into people, squeezed past, or, failing in that, crawled over the seated guests.

After a breathless half-hour of this the three sought a resort farther up-town, where they found the entire upper floors of a restaurant building given over to "trotting." During the previous winter the craze for dancing had swept New York like a plague, and the various Barbary Coast figures had reached their highest popularity. Here, too, the rooms were thronged and the tables taken, despite the lateness of the season, but for a second time Wharton demonstrated that to a man about town of his accomplishments no place is really closed.

However loud the protest against this latest fad, it is doubtful if its effect is wholly harmful, for it at least introduced vigorous exercise and rhythmic movement into

the midnight life of the city. Women went home in the gray dawn with faces flushed from natural causes; exquisite youths of nocturnal habits learned to perspire and to know the feeling of a wilted collar.

Bob Wharton had drunk heavily, but up to this time he had shown little effect from his potations beyond a growing exhilaration; now, however, the wine was taking toll, and Lorelei felt a certain pity for him. Waste is shocking; it grieved her to see a man so blessed with opportunity flinging himself away so fatuously. The hilarity which greeted him on every hand spoke of misspent nights and a reckless prodigality that betokened long habitude. Only his splendid constitution—that abounding vitality which he had inherited from sturdy, temperate forebears—enabled him to keep up the pace; but Lorelei saw that he was already beginning to show its effect. Judging from to-night's experience, he was still, in his sober moments, a normal person; but once he had imbibed beyond a certain point his past excesses uncovered themselves like grinning faces. Alcohol is a capricious master, seldom setting the same task twice, nor directing his slaves into similar pathways. He delights, moreover, in reversing the edge of a person's disposition, making good-natured people pettish or morose, while he sometimes improves those of naturally evil temper. Often under his sway the somber and the stoical become gay and impulsive, while the joyful sink into despondency. But with Robert Wharton, liquor intensified a natural agreeableness until it cloyed. His amenities were monstrously magnified; he became convivial to the point of offensiveness. In the course of this metamorphosis he was many things, and through such a cycle he worked to-night while the girl looked on.

Overcoming his niggardly instincts, Jimmy Knight, as the evening progressed, assumed the burden of entertainment. He, too, adopted a spendthrift gaiety and en-

couraged Wharton's libations, although he drank little himself.

There came a time when Bob could no longer dance—when, in fact, he could barely walk—and then it was that Jim proposed leaving. Bob readily agreed—having reached a condition of mellowness where he agreed enthusiastically to anything—and Lorelei was only too glad to depart. She had witnessed the pitiful breaking-down of Bob's faculties with a curious blending of concern and dismay, but her protests had gone unheeded. Having had a glimpse of his real self earlier in the evening, and being wise in the ways of intemperance, she felt only pity for him now as the three made their way down-stairs.

While Jim went in search of their belongings Bob propped himself against the wall and regarded her admiringly through eyes that were filmed and unfocusable.

"Fairy Princess, you are more adorable every minute," he said, thickly. "Yes! A thousand yesses. And I'm your little friend, eh? No more slaps, no more mysterious exits, what?"

"That depends upon you."

"I'm behaving finely," he vaunted. "I usually act much worse than I have to-night, but I like you. I like you differently—understand? Not like the other girls. You're so beautiful! Makes me dizzy. You forgive my little joke, eh?"

"What joke?"

"Meeting you the way I did to-night. Jim's nice boy—obliged to him."

"I see. Then it was all planned?"

He nodded vehemently and nearly lost his balance.

"How much—did you pay him?" Lorelei queried, with difficulty.

Mr. Wharton waved his hand in a magnificent gesture. "What's money, anyhow? Somebody's bound to get it."

"Fifty dollars?"

He looked at her reproachfully. "That's an insult to

Jim—he's a business man, he is. More than that— Oh yes, and I'll take care of him again—this very night. I'll stake him. He knows a place."

"Will you do me a favor?" she asked, after a pause.

Wharton assured her with abnormal emphasis that her lightest wish was law.

"Then go straight home from here," she pleaded.

"I say, that's not fair." Bob looked ludicrously shocked. "I promised Jim— Wouldn't have me break a sacred promise, would you? We're expected—a little game all arranged where we can bust it quick. If you hear a loud noise—that 'll be Melcher going broke."

"Melcher!" Lorelei looked sharply at her brother, who was approaching with her wraps, and noted that he was perfectly sober. A moment later she checked Bob in the act of giving directions to the cab-driver:

"Wait. Where do you live, Mr. Wharton?"

"The Charlevoix." It was the most expensive bachelor apartment building in the city.

"Drive to the Charlevoix," she told the chauffeur.

"Hold on, Sis," cried Jim. "We're going to take you home first."

"No."

"But—" Jim saw in his sister's face something that brought a smothered oath to his lips. Drawing her out of hearing, he muttered, angrily, "Mind your business; I've got something on."

"I know you have." She met his eyes unflinchingly. "But you sha'n't rob him."

Jim thrust his thin face close to hers, and she saw that it was distorted with rage. "If you don't want to go home, stay here. He's going with me."

"We'll see."

She turned, but he seized her roughly. "What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I'm going to tell him he's being taken to a crooked

gambling-house, and that you're working for Max Melcher. He isn't too drunk to understand that."

Her brother clenched his fist menacingly, but she did not recoil, and he thought better of his impulse.

"Are you grand-standing?" he queried, brutally. "Are you stuck on the boob? or do you want your bit?"

Without reply she walked back to the cab, redirected the driver to the Charlevoix, then seated herself beside Wharton, who was already sinking into a stupor. Jim slunk in behind her, and they were whirled southward.

It was a silent ride, for the besotted young millionaire slept, and Jim dared not trust himself to speak. Lorelei closed her eyes, nauseated, disillusioned, miserable, seeing more clearly than ever the depths into which she had unwittingly sunk, and the infamy into which Jim had descended. Nor was the change, she reflected, confined to them alone. Upon the other members of the family the city had stamped its mark just as plainly. She recalled the ideals, the indefinite but glorious dreams of advancement that she had cherished upon leaving Vale, and realized with a shock how steadily she had degenerated. Where was her girlhood? Where was that self-respect, that purity of impulse and thought that all men recognize as precious? Gradually, bit by bit, they had slipped away. Wisdom had come in their place; knowledge was hers, but faith had rotted. Time was when the sight of a drunken man filled her with terror; now the one beside her scarcely awakened disgust. Bad women had seemed unreal—phantoms of another world. Now she brushed shoulders with them daily, and her own maidenhood was soiled by the contact. She was a girl only in name; in reality she was a woman of the streets, or so she viewed herself in the bitterness of this hour.

At his hotel Wharton roused himself, and Lorelei sent him reeling into the vestibule. Then she and Jim turned homeward through the deserted streets.

CHAPTER XI

DURING the last act of the matinée on the day following Lorelei was surprised to receive a call from John Merkle. "The Judge" led him to her dressing-room, then shuffled away, leaving him alone with her and Mrs. Croft.

"I hope I haven't broken any rules by dropping in during your office hours," he began.

"Theatrical rules are made to be broken; but I do think you are indiscreet. Don't you?"

The banker had been using his eyes with an interest that betrayed his unfamiliarity with these surroundings. "I was on my way up-town and preferred not to telephone." He looked meaningly at Croft; and Lorelei, interpreting his glance, sent the dresser from the room on some errand. "Well, the game worked," said Merkle. "Mrs. Hammon has left home and commenced suit for divorce. If our friend Miss Lynn had set out to ruin Jarvis socially—and perhaps financially—she couldn't have played her cards better."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

Merkle hesitated. "No," he admitted, "it isn't; but I'm a bit embarrassed now that I'm here. I suppose your mother told about seeing me?"

"My mother?" Lorelei's amazement was convincing, and his keen eyes softened. "When did you see mother? Where?"

"Yesterday, at my office. Didn't you know that she and your brother had called?"

Lorelei shook her head; she felt sick with dread of his next words.

"It was very—unpleasant, I fear, for all of us."

"What did they—want?" The girl was still smiling, but her lips beneath the paint were dry.

"They felt that I had—er—involved you in a great deal of notoriety. From what they said I judged that you shared their feelings." He paused awkwardly once more, and she motioned him to continue. "We didn't get on very well, especially your brother and I; for he presumed to—criticize my relations with you and—er—my motive in taking you to ride the other night. I believe I was quite rude to him; in fact, I had the watchman eject him, not daring to trust myself."

"They asked for—money?" Lorelei averted her face, for she could not bear to meet his frank eyes.

"Yes—what I considered a great deal of money. I understood they represented you. They didn't insist, however; they offered me a choice."

"Choice? Of what?"

"Well—I inferred that marriage would undo the wrong I had—"

"Oh-h!" Lorelei rose with a gasp. Bravely she stilled the tremor of her lips. "Tell me—the rest."

"There isn't much more. Your mother was quite hysterical and—noisy. To-day a lawyer came to see me. He offers to settle the whole matter, but I prefer dealing directly with you."

"Do you think I knew anything about it?" she cried, indignantly.

"No, I do *not* think so now. Yesterday I was too much surprised and too angry to know just what I did think. It's perfectly true, however, that I was to blame for the unfortunate outcome of the ride, and I want to make amends for any injury—"

"Weren't you injured, too, by the publicity?"

Merkle showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"That's neither here nor there."

"Please—leave me, and—let me think this over. I must do something quickly, or—I'll smother."

"I'm glad I came," said he, rising. "I'm glad I made sure."

"So am I. What you have told me has made a great difference in—everything. Don't allow them to—" She hesitated and her voice broke. "I can't say it. Y-you must think I'm—unspeakable."

He shook his head gravely. "No, I merely think you are very unfortunate. I think you need help more than any girl I ever knew."

"I do. I do."

"But I am not the one to give it—at least not the kind of help you need."

"I'll need help more than ever—after to-night."

"Yes? Why?"

"Because I'm going to leave home." Lorelei's head was up, and she spoke with a note of defiance.

"Then perhaps I *can* do something." He seated himself again. "You will need money."

"Oh no. I have my salary and the other revenues you know about. I have kept my family for two years."

"Work won't hurt you, but why force yourself to go on with those other things? They're not to your liking, I'm sure."

"My mother and father must live. There isn't enough—don't you see? There just isn't enough for all of us unless I—graft like the other girls."

Merkle broke out, impatiently: "Make an end of it. I'll finance you." She laughed a little harshly. "Don't misunderstand me," he went on, almost eagerly. "Don't think for an instant that I'd venture to expect anything in return. I won't trouble you; I won't even see you. Nobody will ever know. I wouldn't miss the money,

and I'd really love to do it. You tried to do me a favor—"

"There's no use arguing."

"Well, don't be stubborn or hasty. You could use—say, ten thousand dollars. It would keep you going very nicely, and really it's only the price of a new auto."

"Why do you offer me so much?" she asked, curiously.

"Because I like you— Oh, I mean '*like*,' not '*love*'! Because I think you're a good sort and will need money to remain good. You're not an ordinary woman, Miss Knight; you can't live as ordinary women live, now that you're famous. New York won't let you."

"You're very kind and generous after all that has occurred and after knowing my reason for being here."

"My dear child, you didn't choose your family, and as for the other, the women of my set marry for money, just as you plan to do. So do women everywhere, for that matter, and many of them make excellent wives—yes, far better than if they had married poor men. Few girls as beautiful as you in any walk of life are allowed to marry for love. Trust me, a woman like you, if she lives up to the obligations of wifehood, deserves better than one who takes a man for love and then perhaps goes back on her bargain. Will you accept my offer?"

"No. But I thank you."

"Think it over; there is no hurry, and remember I want to help." With one of his infrequent, wan smiles he extended his hand, and Lorelei grasped it warmly, though her face was set and strained.

She was far too well balanced for hasty resolutions, but her mind, once made up, was seldom changed. It distressed her grievously to leave her people, but at the thought of remaining longer with them every instinct rebelled. Her own kin, urged by greed, had not hesitated to cheapen and degrade her; their last offense, coupled with all that had gone before, was more than could be

borne. Yet she was less resentful than sad, for it seemed to her that this was the beginning of the end. First the father had been crippled, then the moral fiber of the whole family had disintegrated until the mother had become a harpy, the brother a scamp, and she, Lorelei, a shameless hunter of men. Now the home tie, that last bond of respectability, was to be broken.

Her first impulse was to take up her abode with Adorée Demorest, but a little thought showed the inadvisability of that. In her doubt she appealed to Lilas, broaching the subject as the two girls were dressing after the performance.

"An apartment?" echoed the latter. "Why, my building is full of them. Who wants one?"

"I do."

"You—?" Lilas turned with her mouth full of hair-pins, and her hands halted in their nimble duties.

When Lorelei had made known her decision, the other girl nodded her approval.

"I don't blame you a bit; a girl needs liberty. I have five rooms, and a Jap to take care of them; they're lovely."

"I can't afford an expensive place."

"Well, there are some three-room flats in the rear, and—I have it! Gertie Moore kept one, but she's gone on the road. It's all furnished, too. Some Rah-rah boy from Columbia fixed it up for her, but they had a row, broke the engagement, and she joined out with the 'Kissing Girls.' If it hasn't been sublet you can get it at your own terms. The building is respectable, too; it's as proper as the Ritz. I'm dining alone to-night. Come to dinner with me and we'll find out all about it."

Lorelei would have preferred a different location, not particularly desiring to be near Lilas; but there was no time in which to look about, and the necessity that faced her made any assistance welcome. Without more discussions she agreed, and the two girls rode up-town together.

The Elegancia, where Lilas lived, was a painfully new, over-elaborate building with a Gothic front and a Gotham rear—half its windows pasted with rental signs. Six potted palms, a Turkish rug, and a jaundiced Jamaican elevator-boy gave an air of welcome to the ornate marble entrance-hall.

Lilas fitted a key to the first door on the right as they went in, explaining, "I'm on the ground floor, and find it very convenient."

"This place is too grand for me," Lorelei objected.

"Oh, offer your own price for Gertie's flat if you like it. They're crazy for tenants. If you didn't want a furnished place you could get in rent-free. They have to fill up these buildings to sell them. I've lived for months without paying a cent, and always in a new apartment. As soon as my lease was up and the owner wanted to renew I'd move to another house that wasn't full. It's cheaper than hotels—if you want to save money."

Lorelei was surprised to find her friend's quarters not only richly, but lavishly furnished. The floors were covered with rugs of the deepest hue and richest luster; the furniture of the front room into which she was first ushered was of an inlaid foreign pattern, of which she could not guess the name or period. There was a player-piano to match the furniture, and a cabinet of rolls. Near by stood a specially made Victrola with an extensive selection of records. There were bronze lamps, ravishing bits of bric-à-brac, lace curtains of which she could judge the quality, and heavy hangings, sheathed now in their summer coverings. The decorations of the room were harmonious and bespoke a reckless disregard of cost. A fluffy Japanese spaniel with protruding eyes and distorted visage capered deliriously at its mistress's feet.

But the objects that intrigued the visitor most strongly were several paintings. They were of a kind she had seldom seen, and in the afternoon light one stood out with

particularly startling effect. It was a dusky landscape; there was a stream, a meadow edge, trees just growing black against a dying sunset, a herd of cattle coming out of the west. Before this picture Lorelei paused, staring with wide eyes of wonder.

Lilas flung her hat carelessly into a chair, lit a cigarette from a Tiffany humidor, then turned with the spaniel in her arms and, beholding her guest with rapt, upturned face, remarked, with a laugh:

"Looks the real thing, doesn't it?"

"Oh—it's wonderful—so clean and cool and quiet! I've seen cattle in Vale that looked just like those, when I went barefoot in the grass."

"Some Dutchman painted it—his name's in the corner. He's dead now, I believe. It used to hang in some museum —I forget where. I like pictures of women best, but—" She shrugged and left her sentence unfinished. "There's a dandy in my bedroom, although it didn't cost half as much as that barn-yard thing. The frame's a foot wide and covered with solid gold."

"I had no idea you lived like this." Lorelei peered through a pair of French doors and into a perfectly appointed library, with a massive mahogany table, deep lounging-chairs, a writing-desk, and a dome-crowned reading-lamp.

"My study," Lilas laughed, shortly. "That's where I improve my mind—not. The books are deadly. Now come; Hitchy Koo must have dinner ready. His name isn't Hitchy Koo, but it sounds like it, and he's 'the cutest little thing; got the cutest little swing.'" She moved down the hall humming the chorus of the senseless popular song from which she had quoted.

Everywhere was the same evidence of good taste in decoration and luxury of equipment, but a suspicion had entered Lorelei's mind, and she avoided comment. Hitchy Koo was cook, butler, and house-boy, and in view of Miss

Lynn's disorderly habits it was evident that he had all he could do to keep the place presentable. His mistress possessed that faculty of disarrangement so common in stage-women; wherever she went she left confusion behind; she was careless to the point of destruction, and charred marks upon the handsome sideboard and table showed where glowing cigarette stumps had suffered a negligent demise. The spaniel was allowed to worry bits of food that left marks on the rug; his owner ate without appetite and in a hypercritical mood that took no account of the wasteful attempts to please her. Quite regardless of the patient little Jap, she alternately found fault with him and discussed with her guest matters of so frank a nature that Lorelei was often painfully embarrassed.

"So, you like my home, do you?" she queried, after a time.

"I've never seen one so beautiful."

Lilas nodded. "Hitchy sleeps out, and that leaves me the whole place. Jarvis furnished it, even to the books, and I'm studying to be a lady." Again she laughed mockingly. "I make a bluff at reading, but so long as I talk about Napoleon he never thinks to question me. I know that French gink backward."

"I wish I had a hobby—something to interest me, something to live for," said Lorelei, lamely.

"Yes. It gives you something to think about when you're alone. It helps you to—stand things." For the first time Lilas showed a trace of feeling in her voice; she dropped her chin into her palm and, leaning upon the table, stared as if at a vision. Her dark eyes were somber, her brows were lowered and drawn together.

The slipshod informality of the meal, the constant faultfinding of the hostess, made it something of a trial. Lorelei was not sorry when it was over and Lilas took her to look at the vacant flat.

Miss Moore's apartment offered a wide contrast to the

one they had just quitted, being very small and very modestly furnished; but it was on the second floor, convenient to both elevator and stairway, it boasted a piano, and the superintendent allowed his prospective tenant to name her own terms. She descended with relief, feeling that she had made not a bad bargain.

She stated, as she sank into Lilas's big library chair, "I feel quite independent at last. The rent is ridiculous, and I can do my own cooking."

"Don't make a fool of yourself. You can do as well as I've done. You have the looks."

"But I'm not engaged to a multimillionaire."

"It seems queer, when I think of it," Lilas mused. "Jarvis is one of the richest men in New York, and he made his money out of the steel business—the business into which I was born. Have you ever been through a mill?"

"No."

"It's wonderful, terrible. I can smell the hot slag, the scorching cinders, the smoke, to this day. Some nights I wake up—screaming, it's so vivid. I see the glare of the furnaces, the belching flames, the showers of sparks from the converters, the streams of white-hot metal, and they seem to pour over me. I have the same dream always; I've had it ever since the night after my father was killed."

"You told me he was killed in a steel-mill."

"Yes, before my eyes. I saw it." Lilas shuddered. "I was a little girl then, but I've never forgotten. We were poor, dreadfully poor, like all the Jews— Oh yes; didn't you know I'm a Jew?"

"Then 'Lilas Lynn'—?"

"Stage name. It's really Lily Levinski. We were Polish. I was dragged up, along with the other workmen's children, in the soot and grime of the Pennsylvania mills. We never saw anything green; nothing grew in our town. I learned to play on a slag-pile, and my shoes, when I had

any, were full of holes—the scars are on my feet yet. Everything was grim and gray there, and the children were puny, big-eyed little things. . . . The mills were hideous by day, but at night they became—oh, tremendous. They changed the sky into a flaring canopy, they roared with the clashing of rolls and the rumble of gears; the men looked black and tiny, like insects, against the red glow from the streaming metal. . . .

"Hell must be like those mills—it couldn't be worse. I used to watch the long rows of little cars, each with an upright ingot of hot steel on its way to the soaking-pit, and I used to fancy they were unhappy spirits going from one torture to another. When the furnaces opened and the flames belched out into the night—they threw horrible black shadows, you know, like eddies of pitch—or when the converters dumped. . . . They lit up the sky with an explosion of reds and yellows and whites that put out the stars. It—it was like nothing so much as hell."

Lorelei had never heard her room-mate speak with such feeling nor in such a strain. But Lilas seemed quite unconscious of her little burst of eloquence. She was seated, leaning forward now with hands locked between her knees; her eyes were brilliant in the gathering dusk. Her memories seemed to affect her with a kind of horror, yet to hold her fascinated and to demand expression.

"I was an imaginative kid," she continued. "It's a trait of our people, like—well, like their distrust of authority and their fear of law. You see, persecution made them cunning, but underneath they are fierce and revengeful and—lawless. I inherited all these traits—but that has nothing to do with the story. Father worked in the Bessemer plant, like any hunkie, and the women used to bring the men's lunches to them. Mother wasn't strong, and that duty fell to me; I had my stand where I used to wait for the whistle to blow. . . .

"It was one of the biggest mills in Pennsylvania, and

its tonnage was always heavy because the superintendent was a slave-driver. He was one of those men who are born without soul or feeling, and he had no interest in anything except rails and plates. His plant held the record, month after month, but at last he lost the broom at the stack. That was the pennant of victory—a broom tied to the highest chimney. I remember hearing father and the others talk about it, and they seemed to feel the loss—although, goodness knows, they had little reason for wanting to keep the broom, since it meant only more sweat and labor for them, while the glory all went to the superintendent. But that's the way with men. . . .

"One day I took my bucket and joined the line of women and girls that filed in through the gates. I was twelve then, but stunted with smoke and thin from poverty. I'll never forget that day; the sole of one of my shoes was worn through, and cinders kept working in. I took my stand just outside the Bessemer plant. It was a big shell of steel girders and corrugated iron, and the side where we were was open. Away up above were the roaring crucibles where the metal was fluxed; beneath ran the little flat-cars waiting for the ingots to be poured. Father saw me and waved his hand—he always waved at me—then I saw the superintendent coming through—a big, square-faced man whom everybody feared. We kids used to think he was an ogre and ate little people. He was raging and swearing and spurring the men on to more haste—I heard later that he had sworn to win the broom back if he wrecked the plant. Wherever he went, the hunkies danced; he could put life into a dead man's limbs, that man. It was because of their great fear of him and his furious urging that—something happened."

Lilas had begun her recital slowly, without apparent object, but once into it she seemed unable to stop; and now, although her words came haltingly, it was plain that she had worked herself into a sort of hysteria in which

IT was characteristic of her that she could so excite herself by the power of visualization as to be completely transported.

she gave little heed to her hearer. It was characteristic of her that she could so excite herself by the power of visualization as to be completely transported.

"Something went wrong overhead; the operator got rattled or somebody was late in his duties and fouled the machinery; anyhow, the converter dumped too soon. Men were working directly underneath, father among the rest. Being so young, I had no idea of what it all meant at the time—but the memory stuck. I saw him go down under a stream of liquid steel—"

Lorelei's horrified exclamation went unnoticed; Lilas's voice was shrill.

"Yes. He was blotted out, right there before my eyes, in an instant. In the time it takes to snap your finger, he—and the others—were gone, changed into smoke, into absolute nothingness. One moment he was whole, alive, flesh and bone, the next he didn't exist; tons of boiling metal ran over the spot. Nothing in the world was ever so horrible. You've never seen liquid steel nor felt the awful breath of it, have you? There wasn't even a funeral. Twelve men, twelve pinches of ashes, were lost somewhere, swallowed up in that mass—nothing more. There was no insurance, and nobody took the blame. Another Jew family, a few more widowed and fatherless foreigners, among that army, meant nothing. Scarcely a month went by without accidents of some sort.

"The shock finished mother, for she was emotional and she had imagination, too. I've never forgotten that day, nor the figure of that shouting, swearing man who came through the Bessemer mill crying for more speed, more speed, more speed—so that a broom could be hoisted on a halyard and so that other men in other cities, for one short month, could point to him with envy.

"I suppose I was too little to make any foolish vows of vengeance, for I was only a ragged mite of a child

among a horde of slaves, but when I grew older I often dreamed of having that man in my power, and—making him suffer. Who would—who *could* have imagined that I'd ever be living on money wrung from the labor of men like my father, and be in a position to meet that man on an equal footing? *I* never did—not in my wildest moments, and yet—here I am. Steel-money bought these books, these rugs and paintings. Any one of those pictures represents the wages of a lifetime for a man like my father. He was murdered, so was my mother—but things are queer. Anyhow, here I am, rich—and the day of reckoning gets closer all the time."

She ended with an abruptness that evidenced her agitation. Rising, she jerked a beaded chain that depended from the center lamp, and the room was flooded with mellow light; then she drew out the table drawer at her guest's elbow, and with shaking hands selected a small box from the confusion within. Lorelei recoiled at the sight of a revolver half hidden among the disorder.

"Goodness! I hope it isn't loaded," the latter exclaimed. "Your story gives me the creeps and that thing—seems to fit in."

"It's loaded, all right. I keep it for protection," Lilas explained, carelessly, then rang for the Jap. She opened the box, which contained several compartments, in one of which was a package of white powder, in another a silver tablespoon. When the obedient Hitchy Koo appeared she ordered a glass of water.

"I don't know why I told you all this," she half apologized to Lorelei. "It has upset me, as it always does."

"How did you ever grow up and—educate yourself?"

"I hardly know. Some neighbors took me in at first, and I worked for them; then I got a job in a dry-goods store, and finally in the corset department. I filled out when I began to get something to eat and I developed a good figure. Finally I got to be a model. I was quick

to learn, and when rich dames came in I watched them. I became good-looking, too, although not so pretty as I am now, for I couldn't put the time or the money on it. But I was pretty enough, and I seemed to appeal strongly to men. Some girls do, you know, without understanding how or why. First, it was the buyer for our department; he lost his head completely, and, although he was married and I didn't care for him, I realized he could do me good. I was seventeen then; he taught me to dress and to take care of myself—he had wonderful taste in such things. It was his affair with me that finally cost him his place—and his wife, too, for that matter. When I'd got all he had I left him and came to New York. The rest isn't a pretty story, for I went the way most girls do who have that appeal I spoke about."

Miss Lynn made this declaration calmly as she busied herself with the glass her servant had fetched. She dissolved a portion of the powder in the spoon, then carefully transferred the liquid into the cap of a pearl-and-gold fountain-pen. Inserting the open end of the receptacle into first one, then the other nostril. she inhaled the contents.

"What are you doing?" asked Lorelei, curiously.

"Something to quiet my nerves. I—wonder why I told you all this?" She eyed her guest speculatively, then shrugged. "Well, since we're to be neighbors, we must be friends, and there's no harm done. Now that Jarvis and I are engaged, he's awfully particular about the company I keep, but he likes you. How different they act when they're in earnest! He even wants me to quit work now, but I like the excitement—it's better than waiting." She glanced at her wrist-watch and drew herself together. "Our time is up, dear; we must get back to the show-shop."

CHAPTER XII

LORELEI exploded her bomb at breakfast Sunday morning, and the effect was all she had dreaded. Fortunately, Jim had gone out, so she had only to combat her mother's panic-stricken objections and her father's weak persuasions. So keen, however, was the girl's humiliation at Merkle's disclosure that Mrs. Knight dared not go to the lengths she would otherwise have allowed herself, and Lorelei's merciless accusations left little to be said in self-defense. Of course, the usual tears followed, likewise repetitions of the time-worn plea that it had all been done for Lorelei's own good and had been prompted by unselfish love for her.

"I'm beginning to doubt that," Lorelei said, slowly. "I think you all look upon me as a piece of property to do with as you please. Perhaps I'm disloyal and ungrateful, but—I can't help it. And I can't forgive you yet. When I can I'll come home again, but it's impossible for me to live here now, feeling as I do. I want to love you—so I'm—going to run away."

Tragically, through her tears, Mrs. Knight inquired: "What will become of us? We can't live—Jim never does anything for us."

In Peter's watery stare was abject fright. "Lorelei wouldn't let us suffer," he ventured, tremulously. "I'm sick. I may die any time, so the doctor says." He was indeed a changed man; that easy good humor that had been his most likable trait had been lost in habitual peevishness.

"I'll keep the house running as before," his daughter assured them, "and I'll manage to get along on what's left. But you mustn't be quite so extravagant, that's all. I sha'n't be—and you wouldn't force me to do anything I'd regret, I'm sure." She choked down her pity at the sight of the invalid's pasty face and flabby form, then turned to the window. Her emotion prevented her from observing the relief that greeted her words.

The moment was painful; Lorelei's eyes were dim, and she hardly saw the dreary prospect of fire-escapes, of whitewashed brick, of bare, gaping back yards overhung with clothes-lines, like nerves exposed in the process of dissection.

"Yes, things will go on just the same," she repeated, then clenched her hands and burst forth miserably, "Oh, I know how badly you need money! I know what the doctor says, and—I'll get it somehow. It seems to me I'd pay any price just to see dad walking around again and to know that you were both provided for. Money, money! You both worship it, and—I'm getting so I can't think of anything else. Nothing else seems worth while."

Two hours later a dray called for her trunks and took them across town.

The Elegancia Apartments looked down on her with chill disapproval as she entered; the elevator-man stared at her with black, hostile eyes until she had made herself known; and even the superintendent—in a less pretentious structure than the Elegancia, he would have been the janitor—now that "Number Six" was rented, did not extend even a perfunctory welcome as he delivered the keys. On the contrary, he made known the exclusive character of the house in such a pointed manner as to offend her.

Lilas was out, she learned, which probably meant that she was still asleep. Lorelei ascended to her new home in

low spirits. Now that she saw the place in strong daylight, she was vaguely disappointed. On the evening previous, the superintendent had lighted it brilliantly, but now it was gloomy, and there was dust and disorder everywhere. The previous occupant had undoubtedly been a temperamental housekeeper; the tragic awakening of love's young dream showed in the hasty nature of her departure for the ice-box was lamentably odorous of forgotten food, the kitchenette needed scrubbing with hot water and lye, the modest fittings of the whole place were in topsy-turvy neglect. When Lorelei's trunks were dumped inside, the chaos appeared complete. She was not accustomed to rely upon her own hands, and at this moment she felt none of the pride that comes of independence. Instead of the glad spirit of freedom she had anticipated she was filled with dismaying doubts. She sat down, finally, in the midst of a confusion that her first efforts had only doubled, and stared about her with miserable eyes. She was very lonely, very friendless, and very much discouraged. Then she noticed the telephone and sprang toward it.

Adorée was at home; her voice answered cheerily, and her interruptions of amazement and delight caused Lorelei's message to spin itself out unduly. Without waiting for an invitation Adorée cried:

"Let me come and help. Please! We'll use both the poodles for mops, and I'll be there in ten minutes. . . . You're a perfect dear to say ves. for I know you want to do it all yourself."

"Come now—quickly. I'm scared—" Lorelei begged, in tearful tones.

"I'll drive right up in my chariot of flame; I was going out, and it's waiting while I kalsomine my face. Are you *sure* everything is good and dirty? Goody! We'll make the prop footman work for once in his life—no, we'll do it ourselves. Good-by."

"I'M beginning to doubt that," Lorelei said, slowly. "to do with as you please."

"I think you all look upon me as a piece of property

In a surprisingly short time the Palace Garden star came flying up the stairs, scorning such delays as elevators. She flung herself upon her friend with a hug and a smack, crying, "Hurrah! Madame Sans Gêne has come to do the scrubbing."

Yet she hardly seemed dressed for house-cleaning. A tremendous floppy hat crowned her flaxen head; she was tightly incased, like a chrysalis in its cocoon, in a delicate creation of pink; her gloves were long and tight, and her high-heeled boots were longer and tighter. Nevertheless she promptly proceeded with a reckless discard of her finery—a process she had begun on her way up-stairs, like a country boy on his approach to a swimming-hole.

She paused in the center of the one passably sized room, and her piquant face was flushed with animation.

"How perfectly corking!" she exclaimed. "How *beautiful!*"

"Do you think so?" Lorelei asked, doubtfully.

"It's just dandy—so cozy and secluded and—shady. Why, it's a darling place! Not a sound, is there? Gee, what a place to sleep!" She sped from one to the other of the three rooms uttering shrieks of rapture. Even the bath-room, which was much like any other, although as cramped as a Chinese lady's foot, excited a burst of enthusiasm.

At last she ceased her inspection, quite out of breath, and declared: "I'm enchanted. I tell you there's nothing like these inside apartments, after all, you're so safe from burglars. But the *rent!* My dear, you stole this place. And to think it's all yours—why, I'm going to live and die here."

"*Will* you? I mean live—"

The dancer laughed. "No, no. If I did either they'd fire you out. But I'll come often, and we'll have the dearest parties—just we two, without any men. We'll let our

hair down, and cook and— *Will* you look at that gas-stove? I could eat it."

It was impossible to resist such infectious spirits. Lorelei began to see sunshine, and before she knew it she was laughing, in the best of humor with herself and her surroundings. Adorée, clad now in a nameless, formless garment which she had discovered in a closet, her own modish belongings safely rolled up in a sheet, had covered her head with a towel turban and incased her feet in an old pair of shoes. Thus equipped, she fell upon the task of regeneration with fanatic zeal. She became grimy; a smear of soot disfigured her face; her skirt dragged, her shoe-tops flopped, and the heels clattered; but she was hilariously happy.

Side by side the girls worked; they forgot their luncheon, then sent the sad-faced footman in search of a delicatessen store, and ate ravenously with a newspaper for table-cloth. By evening the place found itself for once in its life clean and orderly, and the two occupants dressed and went out to a near-by hotel for dinner. Returning, they put the final touches to their task.

When Adorée left, late that night, she kissed her friend, saying:

"Thank you for the loveliest Sunday I ever had. It was splendid, and I'll come again to-morrow."

The theatrical profession is full of women whose lives are flawless; hence it had not been difficult for Lorelei to build up a reputation that insured respect, although her connection with a Bergman show made the task more difficult than it would otherwise have been. During the two years of her stage experience no scandal had attached to her name, and she had therefore begun to feel secure. In that period she had met many men of the usual types that are attracted by footlight favorites, and they had pressed attentions upon her, but so long as she had been recognized as the Lady Unobtainable they had not forced

ADORÉE, clad now in a nameless, formless garment, had covered her head with a towel turban and incased her feet in an old pair of shoes.

their unwelcome advances. Now, however, that a scurrilous newspaper story had associated her name with that of a wealthy man, she began to note a change. The Hammon-Lynn affair was already notorious; Lorelei's part in it led the stage-broken wiseacres to doubt her innocence, and their altered attitude soon became apparent to her. There was a difference also in the bearing of certain members of the company. She heard conversations retailed at second hand by envious chorus-mates; in her hearing detached remarks were dropped that offended her. Bergman's advances had been only another disquieting symptom of what she had to expect — an indication of the new color her reputation had assumed.

Nobel Bergman's success in the show business had long been a mystery among those who knew him; for, to offset an undeniable theatrical talent, he possessed all the appetites, the frailties, and the passions of a rake. It was perhaps most of all his keen personal appreciation of beauty that had made his companies the sensation of New York. At any rate, he had done amazingly well for himself, and entertainments of a certain character had become known as "Bergman Shows," just as show-girls of a dashing type were known as "Bergman Girls," even when employed by rival managers. In his office, or during the organization and production of his spectacles, he was a cold, shrewd man of business; once the venture had been launched, he became an amorous hanger-on, a jackal prowling in search of a kill. His commercial caution steered him wide of the moral women in his employ, but the other kind, and especially the innocent or the inexperienced, had cause to know and to fear him. In appearance he was slender and foppish; he affected a pronounced waist-line in his coats, his eyes were large and dark and brilliant, his mouth was sensual. He never raised his voice, he never appeared to see plain women; such girls as

accepted his attentions were sure of advancement, but paid for it in other ways.

On Monday evening Mr. Slosson, the press-agent, thrust his head through the dressing-room door and inquired: "May I come in?"

"You are in."

"I came to see Lorelei. Say, there's some society people out front who want to meet you, and you're to join them after the show."

"Indeed. Who said so?"

"Bergman."

"Declined, with thanks," promptly said Lorelei.

"Oh, wait. You can't decline this; it's business; Bergman says you must come as a personal favor to him. Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire is giving a box-party, and she told him to fetch you around for supper. She owns a piece of this show, and the theater belongs to the estate, so you'll just have to go."

"Mercy! Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, the college-boy's giddy godmother," Lilas mocked. "I suppose she's out slumming, with her kindergarten class."

Slosson frowned at this levity. "Will you go?" he inquired. "Yes or no?"

"Um-m—I'll have to say 'yes,' it seems."

"Good. I'll 'phone Bergman."

When the press-agent had gone Lilas regarded her companion with open compassion. "Gee! But you're going to have a grand time. That bunch thinks it's smart to be seen with show-people, and of course they'll dance all night."

Lorelei groaned. "And I did so want to go straight back to my new home." When she joined her employer after the show she was in no very agreeable frame of mind.

Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire was a vermilion-haired widow with a chest like a blacksmith, who had become famous for

her jewels and her social eccentricities. She and her party were established at one of the up-town "Trottoires," when Nobel Bergman and Lorelei arrived. Three examples of blushing boyhood devoted themselves to a languid blonde girl of thirty-five, and the hostess herself was dancing with another tender youth, but she came forward, panting.

"So good of you to come, dear," she cried. "This is Miss Wyeth, and these are my boys, Mr.—" She spoke four meaningless names, and four meaningless smiles responded; four wet-combed heads were bowed. She turned to her blonde companion, saying, "She *is* pretty, isn't she, Alice?"

"Very," Alice agreed, without removing her eyes from the youth at her left.

Bergman invited Lorelei to finish the dance; then he inquired, "What do you think of her?"

"Her hair fascinates me; she looks as if she had just burst out of a thicket of henna leaves." Bergman laughed, silently. "But why did she invite me?"

"I told her to."

"You?"

"I knew you'd refuse if I asked you."

"So? Then I'm really your guest instead of hers."

"We'll leave whenever you say."

Throughout the rest of the dance Lorelei was silent, offended at Bergman's deception and uncomfortable at her own situation; but the hostess had ordered a supper of the unsatisfactory kind usual in such places; little as she liked the prospect, she could not leave at once.

The meal was interrupted regularly each time the music played, for dancing was more than a fad in this set—it was a serious business with which nothing was allowed to interfere. The bulky widow was invariably the first upon her feet, and Miss Wyeth followed closely, yielding herself limply to the arms of first one, then another of the youthful coterie. She held her slashed gown high, and in the

more fanciful extravagances of the dance she displayed a slender limb to the knee. She was imperturbable, unenthusiastic, utterly untiring. The hostess, because of her brawn, made harder work of the exercise; but years of strenuous reducing had hardened her muscles, and she possessed the endurance of a bear. Once the meal had dragged itself to a conclusion, there began the customary round of the dancing-places—this being the popular conception of a lark—and Lorelei allowed herself to be bundled in and out of the Thompson-Bellaire theater-car. There was considerable drinking, Bergman, who devoted himself assiduously to his employee, showing more effect from it than the others. He utterly refused to take her home. As the night wore on he became more and more offensive; he grew coarse in a sly, tentative manner, as if feeling his ground. He changed the manner of his dancing, also, until Lorelei could no longer tolerate him.

"Getting tired, my dear?" he queried, when she declined to join the whirling throng.

"Yes. I want to go."

"All right." He leered at her and nodded. "Still living on Amsterdam Avenue?"

"No. I've moved to the Elegancia."

"So? How does mother like it?"

"She's— I'm living alone."

Bergman started, his eyes brightened. "Ah! Then you've come to your senses finally. I thought you would. Let's finish this dance, anyhow."

"I don't want to be seen dancing too much with you."

"Why?"

"You understand why, Mr. Bergman." She eyed him coolly.

The lines of his sinister face, loosened and sagging slightly from drink, deepened for an instant. "Let them talk. I can do more for you than Merkle can."

"Merkle?" Her expression did not change.

"Now don't let's deceive each other." He had never found it necessary to cultivate patience in his dealings with women, and when she pretended ignorance of his meaning he flared out, half in weariness, half in anger:

"Oh, play your game with strangers, but don't put me off. Weren't you caught with him at the Château? Hasn't he fixed you up at the Elegancia? Well, then—"

"You needn't finish. I'm going home now."

He laid a detaining hand upon her arm. "You never learned that speech in one of my shows," he said, "and you're not going to say good night to me. Understand?" He grinned at her with disgusting confidence, and she flung off his touch. They had been speaking in low tones, because of the two vacant-faced boys across the table; now Lorelei turned appealingly to them. But they were not creatures upon whom any woman might rely. Nor could she avail herself of Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire's assistance, for the widow's reputation was little better than Bergman's, and from her attitude it was plain that she had lent herself to his designs. He was murmuring slyly:

"You're a sensible girl; you want to get ahead. Well, I can put you at the top, or—"

"Or—what?" She faced him defiantly.

"Or I can put you out of the business."

The returning dancers offered a welcome diversion.

Lorelei dreaded an open clash with the manager, knowing that the place, the hour, and the conditions were ill suited to a scene. She had learned to smile and to consider swiftly, to cross the thin ice of an embarrassing situation with light steps. Quickly she turned to Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, who was bowing effusively to a newcomer.

"My word! What is Bob Wharton doing here?" exclaimed the widow.

"Bob Wharton? Where?" Miss Wyeth's languor vanished electrically; she wrenched her attention from

the wire-haired fraternity man at her side. Lorelei felt a sense of great thanksgiving.

Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire beckoned, and Wharton came forward, his eyes fixed gloomily upon Lorelei.

"You rascal! So *this* is how you waste your evenings. I *am* surprised, but, now that we've caught you, won't you join us?"

Wharton glanced at the four pawns and hesitated. "It's long past nine; I'm afraid the boys will be late for school."

Miss Wyeth tittered; the sophomore with the bristling pompadour uttered a bark of amusement. Meeting Bob's questioning glance, Lorelei seconded the invitation with a nod and a quick look of appeal, whereupon his demeanor changed and he drew a chair between her and Nobel Bergman, forcing the latter to move. His action was pointed, almost rude, but the girl felt a surge of gratitude sweep over her.

There was an interlude of idle chatter, then the orchestra burst into full clamor once more. Much to the chagrin of her escort, Lorelei rose and danced away with the new-comer.

"Why the distress signal?" queried Bob.

"Mr. Bergman has—been drinking."

"Rum is poison," he told her, with mock indignation. "He must be a low person."

"He's getting unpleasant."

"Shall I take him by the nose and run around the block?"

"You can do me a favor."

He was serious in an instant. "You were nice to me the other night. I'm sorry to see you with this fellow."

"He forced—he deceived me into coming, and he's taking advantage of conditions to—be nasty."

Bob missed a step, then apologized. His next words were facetious, but his tone was ugly: "Where do you want the remains sent?"

"Will you wait and see that mine are safely sent home?" She leaned back, and her troubled twilight eyes besought him.

"I'll wait, never fear. I've been looking everywhere for you. I wanted to find you, and I didn't want to. I've been to every café in town. How in the world did you fall in with the old bell-cow and her calf?"

When Lorelei had explained, he nodded his complete understanding. "She's just the sort to do a thing like that. Thompson, the first martyr, was a decent fellow, I believe; then she kidnapped Bellaire, a young wine-agent. Tuberculosis got him, and she's been known ever since as 'the widow T. B.' I suppose you'd call her 'the leading Juvenile.'"

Lorelei felt a great relief at the presence of this far from admirable young man, for, despite his vicious reputation, he seemed clean and wholesome as compared with Bergman. She was sure, moreover, that he was trustworthy, now that he knew and liked her, and she remembered that of all the men she had met since that newspaper scandal had appeared, he alone had betrayed no knowledge of it in word or deed.

On this occasion Wharton justified her faith. He ignored Bergman's scowls; he proceeded to monopolize the manager's favorite with an arrogance that secretly delighted her; he displayed the assurance of one reared to selfish exactions, and his rival writhed under it. But Bergman was slow to admit defeat, and when his unspoken threats failed to impress the girl he began to ply Wharton with wine. Bob accepted the challenge blithely, and a drinking-bout followed.

The widow T. B. and her party looked on with enjoyment.

Dawn was near when the crowd separated and the hostess was driven away, leaving Lorelei at the door of a taxi-cab in company with her two admirers. The girl bade

them each good night, but Bergman ignored her words and, stepping boldly in after her, spoke to the driver.

Bob had imbibed with a magnificent disregard of consequences, and as a result he was unsteady on his feet. His hat was tilted back from his brow, his slender stick bent beneath the weight he put upon it.

"Naughty, naughty Nobel!" he chided. "Come out of that cab; you and I journey arm and arm into the purpling East."

"Drive on," cried Bergman, forcing Lorelei back into her seat, as she half rose.

Bob leaned through the open cab window, murmuring thickly: "Nobel, you are drunk. Shocked—nay, grieved—as I am at seeing you thus, I shall take you home."

"Get out, will you?" snapped the manager, undertaking to slam the door.

But Wharton was in a declamatory mood and went on, swingingly: "The sky is faintly flushed with pink; Apollo in his chariot draws nigh. The morning-glory closes with the sun, Bergman, and if a fairy princess is late she will be shut out and forced to sleep on the petals of a rose. My dear Nobel, don't spoil her beauty sleep."

"I'm tired of your insolence. I'll—"

Bergman never finished his sentence, for in his rage he committed a grave blunder—he struck wildly at the flushed face so close to his, and the next instant was jerked bodily out of his seat. Lorelei uttered a cry of fright, for the whole side of the cab seemed to go with her employer.

There was a brief scuffle, a whirl of flying arms, then Bergman's voice rose in a strangely muffled howl, followed by nasal curses. With a bellow of anguish he suddenly ceased his struggles, and Lorelei saw that Bob was holding him by the nose. It happened to be a large, unhandsome, and fleshy member, and, securely grasping it, Bergman's conqueror held him at a painful and humiliating disadvantage.

Bob was panting, but he managed to say, "Come! We will run for the lady—once around the block."

A muffled shriek of pain was the answer, but the street was empty save for some grinning chauffeurs, who offered no assistance.

"Be a good fellow. I insist, my dear Nobel. Advance! Double quick! Charge!"

The two men moved away haltingly, then at a zigzag trot, and finally at a slow run. They disappeared around the corner, Bob Wharton leading, Bergman bent double and screaming poisonous oaths.

"Drive on, quickly," Lorelei implored, but the chauffeur cranked his motor reluctantly, craning his neck in an evident desire to see more of this interesting affray. His companions were laughing loudly and slapping their thighs. Despite Lorelei's hysterically repeated orders, he experienced difficulty in starting the machine; finally he lifted the hood and fumbled inside. A moment passed, then another; he cranked once more, but as the motor was seized with a fit of shuddering the two white-fronted figures turned the upper corner and approached. Their relative positions were unchanged. The block was a short one, yet they seemed winded. Bergman was sobbing now like a woman, and he was followed by three curious newsboys.

Bob paused at the starting-point and wheezed: "Bravo! You done noble, Nobel. We've learned some new steps, too, eh?" All power of resistance had left the victim, who seemed upon the verge of collapse. "I say we've learned some new steps; haven't we, Bergy?" He tweaked the distorted member in his grasp, and Bergman's head wagged loosely.

A late diner cruised uncertainly down the street, and, sensing the unusual, paused, rocking in his tracks.

"Whash trouble? Shome fightin' goin' on?" he inquired, brightly.

"Oh, please — please — " Lorelei cried, tremulously. "Don't—"

"Canter for the kind lady," Wharton insisted. "Come on." He began to lift and lower his shoulders in imitation of a rider. Bergman capered awkwardly. "Once more."

"Fine!" shouted the drunken spectator, clapping his hands loosely. "Tha's bully. Now make 'im shingle-foot."

"Single-foot? Certainly. He's park gaited."

"Mr. Wharton! *Bob*—" Lorelei's agonized entreaty brought her admirer to the cab door, but he fetched his prisoner in tow. "Let him go or—we'll all be arrested."

"Want see 'im shingle-foot," eagerly importuned the stranger.

"I'll take off his bridle if you insist. But it's a grand nose. I—love it. Never was there such a nose."

Bergman, with a desperate wrench, regained his freedom and staggered away with his face in his hands.

"It—actually stretched," said Bob, as he regretfully watched his victim. "I dare say I'll never find another nose like it."

The appreciative bystander lurched forward and flung an arm over his shoulder, then, peering in at the girl, exclaimed: "Good, wasn't it? I had a horse once, an' I know. You're a'right, m' frien'. Let's go get another one."

Lorelei's cab got under way at last, but barely in time, for a crowd was assembling. She sank back weakly, and her last glimpse showed Wharton arm-in-arm with the tipsy wayfarer.

Not until she was safely inside her little apartment, with the chain on the door, did she surrender; then she burst into a trembling, choking fit of laughter. But her estimate of Wharton had risen, and for the first time he seemed not entirely bad.

CHAPTER XIII

JIMMY KNIGHT felt his sister's desertion quite as keenly as did his mother and father, for his schemes, though inchoate, were ambitious, and his heart was set upon them. Lorelei's obstinacy was exasperating—a woman's unaccountable freakishness.

He confided his disappointment to Max Melcher. "It's pretty tough," complained Jimmy. "I had Merkle going, but she crabbed it. Then just as that boob Wharton was getting daffier over her every day she gets her back up and the whole thing is cold."

"You mean it's cold so far as you're concerned," Melcher judicially amended.

"Sure. She's sore on me, and the whole family."

"Then this is just the time to marry her off. New York is a mighty lonesome place for a girl like her. Suppose I take a hand."

"All right."

"Will you declare me in?"

"Certainly."

Melcher eyed his associate coldly. "There's no 'certainly' about it. You'd throw your own mother if you got a chance. But you can't throw me, understand? You try a cross and—the cold-meat wagon for yours. I'll have you slabbed at the morgue."

Jimmy's reply left no doubt of the genuineness of his fears, if not of his intentions. Strange stories were told in the Tenderloin—tales of treachery punished and ingratitude revenged. Jimmy knew several young men

who appeared out of the East Side at Melcher's signal. They were inconspicuous fellows, who bore fanciful dime-novel names—Dago Red, Izzy the Toad, Jew Mike, the Worm, and the rest—and no rustler's stronghold of the old-time Western cattle country ever boasted more formidable outlaws than they. New York is law-ridden, therefore corruption reigns; vice is capitalized, and in consequence there are men who live not only by roguery, but by violence. They hide in the crannies of the underworld; politics is their protection. At election times they do service for men high in authority; betweenwhiles they thrive on the bickerings and feuds among the despoilers. Jim knew these gunmen well; he had no wish to know them worse.

"I can't promise anything definite when she's sore on me," he declared.

"Oh yes, you can. She'll marry to please your mother and father, and she'll fix them up the first thing. Get them to agree to split their share, and I'll take a hand. If it doesn't go through there's no harm done."

"I don't see how you're going to frame a marriage—and yet she won't stand for anything else."

"You'll have to help, of course, and so will your mother. I've a hunch that we can handle Wharton all right—through booze. A man can be made to marry anybody if he's drunk enough."

"He's about ready to ask her—*she's* the one to fix. She hates men, though, and that Merkle story made her crazy."

"Sore, eh?"

"She talked the Dutch route—thinks her good name is gone, and regards every man as a hyena."

Melcher pondered for several moments. "I think I know Lorelei better than you do," he stated, deliberately, "and I believe we can pull this off, provided Wharton really wants to marry her. Anyhow, he's so rich it's worth the odds, and she's just the sort to fall for it."

"What's the idea?"

"If she's sore about that story in *The Despatch* we'll pull another one—and keep pulling them."

"Humph! That 'll queer Wharton."

"Not if you get inside his shirt and make him believe they're lies. You and your mother will have to convince her that he's her only 'out.'"

"I don't think much of that program," Jim protested, nervously.

Melcher smiled. "A girl like her can be driven anywhere if she's handled right. Between you and your mother and Lilas you can do it."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. Ma's got her afraid of men. If we could scare her good, if we could tip some John to rough it with her some night, she might stampede to the altar."

"That's easy, but you can't put a stop-order on a thing like that. There's no telling how far the guy might go."

"Oh, she'll take care of herself," said Jim, carelessly; "she's as strong as a pony."

"If you'll take the chance I'll stake a shillaber to do it. I've got half a dozen high-class fellows working the hotels, and Lilas knows some of them."

Jim shrugged disgustedly. "I suppose I'll have to repent and be a good boy," he snorted, "and let Lorelei weep on my shoulder. Gee! She makes me sick."

"I'll take care of my part, and—maybe we can put it through. This is out of my line, but they do it abroad, so why not here? The girl's no more than human." Mr. Melcher seemed ingenuously pleading for reasonableness. "If we make good I'll hang out a sign, 'Max Melcher, Matrimonial Agent.' Meanwhile I want it understood with your mother that I share in what comes her way."

"I'll fix that," promised Jim.

He found it, in fact, no very difficult task to regain at

least a part of his sister's lost esteem, though the process took time. He went about it with the lazy, cat-like patience of his kind, behaved himself, kept his mouth shut, and assumed just enough of an injured air to be plausible. He enlisted the aid of his mother and of Lilas Lynn, and meanwhile made himself as agreeable as possible to Robert Wharton.

Melcher was as good as his word, and there shortly appeared in *The Despatch* an unpleasant rehash of the former story. It was published in connection with the Hammon divorce proceedings, news of which was exciting comment, and it further smirched Lorelei's reputation. Wharton ignored it utterly, but Merkle was prompt in his indignation and sympathy. This unshaken confidence in her afforded Lorelei far more comfort than Bob's unconcerned attitude, which might be merely the result of his own lax standards. Upon the other men she knew the effect of the story was quickly noticeable, and she was forced to be on guard at all times. Several whom she considered sincere admirers proved to be quite the opposite; some whom she had counted as friends dropped her entirely; others of a different sort undertook to press their acquaintance beyond prudent bounds.

Jim was appropriately indignant, but helpless, and Mrs. Knight unweariedly blamed everything upon her daughter's desertion of the family circle, predicting more evil to follow unless Lorelei came home at once. She also dwelt upon the fact that Peter was steadily failing and was in immediate need of both medical and surgical attention. The doctor had pronounced sentence, prescribing a total change of living and a treatment by foreign specialists.

In some unaccountable way the story of Nobel Bergman's humiliation became public and afforded the basis for a newspaper article that brought him to Lorelei's dressing-room in a fine fury. Even after she had con-

vinced him of her innocence his resentment was so bitter that she expected her dismissal at any time.

Other press stories followed; the girl suddenly found herself notorious; scarcely a day passed without some disagreeable mention of her. There was published a highly imaginative but circumstantial account of a weak-minded youth whom she had driven to suicide—utterly false, of course, but difficult to deal with. A Sunday "special" appeared—one of those fantastic, colored-supplement nightmares—in which she was pictured as a vampire with an angel's face. It was the hackneyed "moth and flame" story. The page was luridly decorated with a swarm of entomological curiosities—winged bipeds supposedly representing her fatuous admirers. These fond victims of her enticements appeared to be badly singed and crippled.

Adorée Demorest, as indignant as Lorelei herself, declared finally that her friend must be the object of a premeditated attack directed by some strong hand, and once this suspicion had entered Lorelei's mind it took root in spite of its seeming extravagance. Her good sense argued that she was of too little consequence to warrant such an assault, but her relatives seized the suggestion so avidly as to more than half convince her.

Mrs. Knight attributed this injustice first to Bergman, then to Merkle, whom she hated bitterly since her unfortunate attempt at blackmail; Jim was inclined to agree with her.

"Money can do anything," he stated, gloomily, "and these big guys amuse themselves by hunting beautiful women. It's a game with them. When one of 'em takes a fancy to a girl she's a goner. It may not be Merkle in this case, but—you're the handsomest woman in New York, and I'll bet some old spider is weaving his web for you. When he has spoiled your good name and ruined your chances of marrying or of making an honest living

he'll creep out and show himself. They frame innocent men for Sing Sing in this town, so why can't they frame a girl for something else?"

Lorelei abhorred spiders; the picture of some evil-minded millionaire enmeshing her in a web of intrigue brought a sickening feeling of helplessness and apprehension. Of course she thought the idea utterly fantastic, but Jim and her mother appeared to believe it, and her own notions of the city's wickedness were so vivid that anything seemed possible. Certainly some malign influence seemed to be deliberately at work against her, and a thousand disagreeable incidents, once she took time to reflect upon them, bore out her suspicions. She was half minded to run away, but dared not.

Mrs. Knight, as always, ended her sympathetic reassurances by saying, "If you were only married, my dear, that would end all our troubles."

The climax of these annoyances came one night after a party at which Lorelei had been presented to an old friend of Miss Lynn's. Lilas had introduced the man as one of her girlhood chums, and Lorelei had tried to be nice to him; then in some way he arranged to take her home. The memory of that ride was a horror.

Lorelei, as Jim had said, was strong, and she fought the ruffian's attack with the desperation of utter terror; but her shame at the indignity was so keen that she refrained as long as possible from crying for help. Then, hearing her screams, the chauffeur stopped his car and made an investigation. Fortunately for her, he was more of a man than most night-hawk drivers, and he promptly summoned an officer.

Miss Lynn's girlhood friend waited for no test of the law; he beat a hasty retreat, uttering threats that rang in Lorelei's ears and redoubled her previous fears.

Her wrists and arms bore purple marks, her dress was torn, her limbs shook from the effects of her struggle,

and even when she had gained the security of her rooms she was unable to shake off her fright. Neither could she sleep, for menacing forms crouched in the darkness: most of the night she walked the floor in a panic.

She knew now that she was hunted; the man had told her so. She felt like a deer cowering in a brake with the hounds working close. Her cover seemed pitifully insecure.

Thus far Max Melcher's campaign had worked even better than he had expected; and meanwhile he had employed Jim in assiduously cultivating Robert Wharton and arranging as many meetings as possible between Bob and Lorelei. A short experience had taught Jim to avoid his victim in daylight, for in Bob's sober hours the two did not agree; but once mellowed by intoxication, Wharton became imbued with a carnival spirit and welcomed Jim as freely as he welcomed every one. Incidentally the latter managed to reap a considerable harvest from the association, for Bob was a habitual gambler, and the courteous treatment he received at Melcher's place seemed to reconcile him to the loss of any amount of money.

When, on the morning after her distressing adventure, Lorelei sent for her brother and demanded vengeance upon her assailant he decided that it was time to test the issue. He pretended, of course, to be ferociously enraged, but on learning over the telephone that the wretch had left the city he declared that there was nothing to be done except perhaps exact an explanation from Lilas.

Miss Lynn, however, could offer no excuse. She was heartbroken at the occurrence, but she was too full of her own troubles to give way to her sympathy for others. Jarvis Hammon, it seemed, had heard about the party, and was furious with her.

"You must expect to meet some muckers in this business," she remarked, philosophically, "and you've had

so much notoriety, my dear, that the fellow probably wouldn't believe you were all right."

Jim agreed. "I guess you'll have to forget it, Sis. Just don't think about it. I'll bring Wharton around tonight, and we four will have supper, eh?"

Lilas's hesitation in accepting this invitation seemed genuine, but she acquiesced finally, saying with a short laugh: "All right. Maybe a little jealousy won't hurt my lord and master. He's getting too bossy, anyhow."

When the four set out that night Robert Wharton was in exceptional spirits and, as always, devoted himself to Lorelei. For him life was a joyous adventure; he took things as they came, and now that he knew the girl for what she was he did not allow himself the slightest liberty. He was a fervent suitor, to be sure, yet he courted her with jests and concealed his ardor behind a playful raillery.

Jim had ordered supper at a popular Washington Heights inn, and thither the quartette were driven in an open car which he hired in the square beside the theater.

As the glassy expanse of upper Broadway unrolled before them Bob explained: "My chauffeur quit to invest his savings in real estate, so I sold my machine. If he'd only listened to my advice and bought stocks with my money I might have made a good commission and afforded to keep a car. But nobody deals with the brokers nowadays." He sighed gloomily. "We live lonely lives. We are objects of suspicion—even the newsboys bite the pennies we give them."

Jim scoffed. "I suppose you Pittsburg plunderers don't know where your next meal is coming from."

"Mine is coming from you, I hope, otherwise I'll be a public charge until banking-hours."

"You've been gambling again," Lorelei accused.

Bob nodded carelessly.

At their destination they found seats on a balcony overlooking the Hudson; and Jim, being in funds, played host with a prodigality that mimicked Wharton.

It was a charming place for a supper; the wooded bluffs fell away abruptly and a cool breath from the river refreshed the diners; the inn itself was just comfortably filled with merry-makers whom the heat had driven from the asphalt cañons farther down-town; in the distance the Jersey lights winked like glittering brilliants sewed into the night; other illuminations swam through the mysterious void separating the shores; an orchestra played, not too loudly, and several couples were dancing. It had been a stifling week; people complained that they could not dine in comfort, yet they tangoed and trotted bravely wherever there was music and an open floor.

Contrary to her custom, Lilas Lynn allowed herself free rein, and for once drank more than was good for her, rejoicing openly in the liberty she had snatched.

It is a peculiar experience to sit soberly through a meal and see one's companions become intoxicated. Lorelei had often done so, carelessly enough, but now her recent worries had not only depressed her, but made her pensive, and it was in no approving mood that she watched Lilas and Bob respond to the effect of the wine. The whole procedure struck her, like her present life as a whole, as both inane and wicked, and she longed desperately to lay hold of something really decent, true, and permanent.

Jimmy Knight's admirable hospitality continued; he devoted his entire attention to his guests, he made conversation and he led it into the channels he desired it to follow. Then, when the psychological moment had come, he acted with the skill of a Talleyrand. No one but he knew precisely how Bob's proposal was couched, whence it originated, or by what subtlety the victim had been induced to make it. As a matter of fact, it was no proposal, and not even Bob himself suspected how his words

had been twisted. He was just dimly aware of some turn in the conversation, when he heard Jim exclaim:

"By Jove, Sis, Bob asks you to marry him!"

In prize-ring parlance, Jimmy had "feinted" his opponent into a lead, then taken prompt advantage to "counter."

Lorelei awoke to her surroundings with a start, sensing the sudden gravity that had fallen upon her three companions.

"What—?"

Lilas nodded and smiled at the bewildered lover. "That's the way to put it over, Bob—before witnesses."

"Don't joke about such things," cried Lorelei, sharply.

"Joke? Who's joking?" Jim was indignant and glanced appealingly at Bob. "You meant it, didn't you?"

"Sure. No joking matter," Bob declared, vaguely. "I was just saying that this is no life for a fellow to lead—batting 'round the way I do; then Jim said—I mean *I* said—I needed a wife, a beautiful wife. I never saw a girl beautiful enough to suit me before, and he said—"

Jim's relief came as an explosion.

"There! That's English. You spoke a mouthful that time, Bob, for she certainly is a beauty bright. But I didn't think you had the nerve to ask her. If she says yes, you'll be the luckiest man in New York—the whole town's crazy about her."

"We'll make her say yes," Lilas added, with drunken decision. "Come, dear, say it." She bent a flushed face toward Lorelei and laid a loose hand upon her arm. "Well? What's your answer?"

Bob fixed heavy eyes upon his heart's desire and echoed: "Yes. What d' you say?" More than once in his sober moments he had pondered such a query, and now that it appeared to have taken shape without conscious effort, he was not displeased with himself,

BOB rose unsteadily, glass in hand. "Thanks, noble comrades," he proclaimed; "she's mine!"

"I say, *you don't know what you're doing*," Lorelei responded, curtly.

Now Bob, like all men in his condition, was quite certain that he was in perfect possession of his faculties, and therefore he very naturally resented such an absurd assertion. "Don't you b'lieve it," he protested. "I know what I'm doing, all right, all right."

"A man never speaks his mind until he's ginned," Lilas giggled.

"Righto! I'm not half drunk yet."

Jim urged the suitor on with a nervous laugh, at the same time avoiding his sister's eyes. "She's stalling, Bob. Make her answer."

"Yes or no?" forcefully insisted the wooer, determined, now, to show his complete sobriety.

"No."

Jim seized Wharton's hand and shook it lustily. "Congratulations, old man; that means yes. I'm her brother, and I know. Why, she told father that you were her ideal, and pa said he'd die happy if you two were married. He meant it, too; he's a mighty sick man."

Lorelei stirred uncomfortably, and the faint color in her cheeks faded slowly. "We'll talk about it some other time—to-morrow. Please don't tease the poor man any more. He didn't know what he was saying, and—now, for Heaven's sake, talk about something else."

Jim leaped to his feet with a grin and a chuckle, then drew Lilas from her chair, saying: "The lovers are embarrassed, and they're dying to be alone. Let's leave 'em to talk it over."

"She's a dear, Bob, and I wish you both joy. But don't kiss her here," said Lilas, warningly; then with a wave of her hand she turned toward the dancing-room with Jim.

"Call us when you've fixed the date," laughed the latter, over his shoulder.

When he and Lilas had danced the encore and returned to the table Bob rose unsteadily, glass in hand, and nodded at them.

"Thanks, noble comrades," he proclaimed; "she's mine!"

"Hurrah!" Lilas kissed Lorelei effusively. Jim seized Bob's hand, crying:

"Brother!" He waved to a waiter and ordered a magnum of champagne. "Bring me a wreath of orange blossoms and a wedding-cake, too." His jubilation attracted the attention of the other diners; the occupants of a near-by table began to applaud, whereupon Bob beamed with delight.

Lorelei was very white now, but she was given no chance to speak. Nor was there anything for her to say, torn as she was by conflicting emotions and uncertain of what feeling most strongly possessed her. Foremost in her thoughts was the realization that she had won the fight she had been reared and trained for, that the climax of her worldly hopes had come; but with this she also experienced a sickly loathing for herself. During Bob's protestations of love she had fought a brief but disastrous battle. That moral perfidy which had been her teaching since childhood had influenced her decision no more perhaps than her terror at the plight in which her mysterious persecution had left her. Weighing on the same side with these considerations were also the needs of her family, her own bitter distaste for her present life, and her desire for peace and outward respectability even at the cost of secret degradation. She had decided swiftly, recklessly, reasoning that this proffered marriage was merely a bargain by which she got more than she gave. She had accepted without allowing her better self an opportunity to marshal its protests, and, having closed her eyes and leaped into the dark, it now seemed easier to meet new consequences than to heed those higher feelings that were tardily

"AH! You're home again, finally. Where have you been?" his threatening attitude brought an uncomfortable silence

he demanded, in a voice heavy with anger. His hostile tone
upon the hearers.

struggling for expression. She did pity Wharton, however, for it seemed to her that he was the injured party. When he was himself he was a very decent fellow, and it was a contemptible trick thus to cheat him. It would have been less ignoble to sell herself outright to a man she detested—for the transaction would then have been one of dollars and cents, purely, a sacrifice prompted by necessity, so she reasoned—whereas to impose upon the weakness of one she rather liked was not only dishonest, but vile.

But she was in a wanton mood to-night, and of late a voice had been desperately urging her to grasp at what she could, that she might, as long as possible, delay her descent into worse conditions.

She heard Lilas inquiring: "When does the marriage come off? Right away?"

Bob, who appeared somewhat dazed by the suddenness and the completeness of his good fortune, smiled vacantly. "Any time suits me," he said. "I'm a happy man—little Joys are capering all over the place and old Dr. Gloom has packed his grip."

Jim startled them all by saying, crisply: "Let's make it to-night. I know Bob—he's not the sort to wait."

"Fine! Never thought of that." Bob welcomed the suggestion with a delight that drowned Lorelei's frightened protest; then, as the idea grew in his mind, he joyously appropriated it as his own. A mere proposal of marriage and an acceptance were more or less hackneyed; the event contained no elements of the spectacular; but to follow it promptly with a midnight ceremony impressed him as a grandiose achievement and one calculated to shed luster upon his adventurous career. "That's my idea of romance—that's the way I like to do things," he declared. "We'll be married soon's I pay this check." Fumbling through his pockets, he remembered that his last dollar had gone across Melcher's gaming-table earlier

in the evening, and cried in dismay, "Hold on! Nothing doing in the marriage line, after all. I'm bust. Isn't that a burglar's luck? And right on the altar steps, too."

"I'll settle everything—all the way through," Jim offered, eagerly.

Bob feebly demurred, asserting that his temporary financial condition ruined the whole joke, and that he never married without a pocket full of money; but as Jim insisted, and seeing that Miss Lynn was becoming tearful at the thought of a disappointment, he yielded grudgingly.

"But—I say—where do they keep these weddings?" he inquired. "Everything's closed now, and there's nobody dancing at the City Hall, is there?" He appealed helplessly to Jim.

Jim rose to the occasion with the same promptitude he had displayed throughout. "Leave it to Jimmy the Fixer," he cried, reassuringly. "Marriages aren't made in heaven any more—that's old stuff. They're made in Hoboken, while the cab waits. Get your things on, everybody, while I telephone." He allowed no loitering; he waved the girls away, sent the waiter scurrying with his bill, helped Robert secure hat and stick, and then dove into a telephone-booth as a woodchuck enters its hole. When he had disposed his three charges inside a taxi-cab he disappeared briefly, to return with a basket of champagne upon his arm. It is a wise general who provides himself in advance with ammunition.

It was not late, as late hours are computed, but the streets were empty of traffic; hence the driver made good time, and a waiting ferry at the foot of Forty-second Street helped to shorten the journey. The wine-basket was lighter as the machine rushed up the cobbled incline to the crest of the Weehawken bluffs; Bob and Lilas were singing as it tore down the Boulevard.

The smooth celerity with which this whole adventure

ran its course argued a thorough preparation on James's part, but Lorelei was in no condition to analyze. On the contrary, she was tossed in the vortex of warring impulses. More than once she laid her hand upon the cab door, feeling that she could not go on with this damnable travesty. But necessity urged; she was tired, disgusted, reckless. Her former arguments continued to prove potent.

Even at the journey's end there was a suspicious lack of delay. The vehicle stopped in a narrow business street, now dark and dismal; its occupants were hurried up a stairway and into a room filled with law-books, where a sleepy Justice of the Peace was nodding in a cloud of cigar smoke. There followed a noisy shuffling of chairs, some mumbled questions and answers, the crackle of papers, a deal of unintelligible rigamarole, then a man's heavy seal-ring was slipped upon Lorelei's finger, and she knew herself to be Mrs. Robert Wharton. It was all confused, unimpressive, unreal. She was never able fully to recall the picture of that room or the events that occurred there. They formed but a part of the kaleidoscopic jumble of the night's occurrences.

The wedding party was in the cab once more, and it was under way. Lilas was singing maudlinly, lying back in Jim's arms with her feet projecting through a window; the groom was laughing foolishly and pawing at his bride. The street lights reeled by in drunken procession. Now that his work was done, Jim flung aside his caution and, popping the cork of a wine-bottle, drank deeply, in disregard of Lilas's attempts to share the contents. He was fiercely elated; he imbibed with the eager thirst of a dipsomaniac. It was all so like a nightmare that Lorelei began to doubt her own sanity.

Once at rest in the dim-lit tunnel of the ferry-boat, however, she was brought sharply to herself by hearing her brother exclaim: "Say! He hasn't kissed her yet."

Lilas shrieked, and Bob stiffened himself, then slipped an arm around his bride. As she shrank away he mumbled angrily: "Here! I won't stand for that," and crushed her to him. He tipped her head back, then pressed his lips to hers, and she yielded, her whole body a-quiver with repugnance. But it was part of the price, she told herself; therefore she paid, although she was like to faint with the effort. She became conscious of a sudden savagery that swept over Bob at her first surrender, and in revulsion fought herself free from his embrace. He followed her, his eyes fierce, his hot breath heavy with the fumes of wine; his clutch hurt her. "By God!" he mumbled, thickly, "You *are* beautiful—*beautiful.* And you're mine. She's mine, eh? No foolishness about that, is there?" he appealed to Jim.

As they drew in toward the New York side the chauffeur inquired, "Where to, now?"

"Why, drive us—" Jim hesitated. There was a silence which Lilas broke with a titter. The bridegroom joined her in an awkward laugh.

"Never thought of that."

"Drive to the Charlevoix," Lorelei said, sharply.

"No women allowed there; it's a stag place," objected Bob.

"Of course! We'll take you home. It's all over now," she told him, faintly.

"You can't get into no hotel without baggage," explained the driver.

"That's right. No baggage, no money. Deuce of a way to get married." Bob turned again to Jim, who solved the difficulty with a word.

"Why, you're both going to Lorelei's place, of course; then you can make your plans to-morrow."

The bride's half-strangled protest was lost in a burst of enthusiasm from Lilas.

"Surest thing you know," she cried; "and we'll stop

in my flat for a farewell bottle; I've got a whole case. We'll end the night with another party at Jarvis's expense. He's crazy about marriages, anyhow. Ha! But you needn't tell him I was—full, understand?" She fell silent suddenly, then burst into a loud laugh. "Bah! I should worry!" Jim struggled with her as for a second time she endeavored to thrust her silken ankles through the taxi window.

The ferry drew into its slip, the cab motor shivered, the metallic rattle of windlass and chain proclaimed the return to Manhattan. Up the deserted avenues the vehicle sped, while inside the white-faced bride cowered with fingers locked and heart sick with dread.

CHAPTER XIV

HITCHY KOO had gone home. When Lilas ushered her friends in and snapped on the lights, the apartment, save for the delirious spaniel, was unoccupied. She flung down her hat, coat, and gloves, then, with the help of Jim, prepared glasses and a cooler. Lorelei was restless; the thought of more wine, more ribaldry, revolted her, and yet she was grateful for this delay, brief though it promised to be. Any interruption, trivial or tragic, would be welcome. Meanwhile her husband's eyes followed her hungrily.

Strangely enough, the fears that had driven her to this reckless marriage had dwindled steadily since the final words were spoken, and now these apprehensions seemed in no wise so alarming as the consequences of her rash act. She cringed at her own thoughts; they set her to shivering; she stole a glance at her husband and was not reassured, for he continued to eye her with a look she did not like. She was forced to pledge her own happiness in a glass, then in a wild moment of desperation longed to deaden herself with liquor as the others had done.

Jim and Lilas were talking loudly when a key grated in the lock, the door of the little apartment opened and clicked shut again. Another instant and Jarvis Hammon paused on the threshold, glowering.

Lilas's wine-glass shattered upon the floor.

"Jarvis! You frightened me," she cried.

"Evening, Mr. Hammon." Bob lurched to his feet, upsetting his chair. "This *is* a s'prise."

Jim had risen likewise, but Hammon had eyes for no one except Lilas.

"Ah! You're home again, finally. Where have you been?" he demanded, in a voice heavy with anger. His hostile tone, his threatening attitude brought an uncomfortable silence upon the hearers.

"Now, Jarvis," said the bridegroom, placatingly, steadying himself meanwhile with the aid of the table, "don't be a grouch. Everything's all right."

Lilas remained motionless, staring defiantly. Her face had slowly whitened, and now its unpleasantness matched that of her elderly admirer. Hammon dropped his smoldering gaze to the half-empty glasses, then raised it, scowling at Jim.

"Humph! Who is—this?"

Lilas made her guest known. "Mr. Knight, Mr. Hammon. I believe you know Miss Knight."

"So *you're* the one." Hammon showed his teeth in a sardonic smile.

"I'm the one what?" inquired Jim, with a sickly attempt at pleasantry.

"By God! What does she see in *you?*" Hammon measured the young man with contemptuous curiosity.

"Don't be an ass, Jarvis," began Lilas. "I—"

She was interrupted roughly. "That's precisely what I don't intend to be; and I don't intend that Bob shall be one, either." He turned to young Wharton. "What are you doing here, my boy?" he asked.

"Just stopped in for a minute. You'll find all the bric-à-brac in its place."

"Now don't get funny. I'm sorry to see you with these grafters." Hammon indicated Jim and Lorelei with a nod.

"Eh? What's that?" Bob stiffened, and Jim murmured an indignant protest.

"You heard me. They're grafters, and you'd better cut loose from them."

"Wait a minute. Lorelei's my wife. 'S true, Jarvis."

"Wife?" Hammon took a heavy step forward. "*Wife?* Hell, you're drunk, Bob!"

"P'raps. But we're mar—"

"So! You landed him, did you?" Hammon glared at the brother and sister. "You got him drunk and married him, eh? And Lilas helped you, I suppose. Fine! They're crooks, Bob, and they've made a fool of you."

Bob checked the speech on Lorelei's lips with an upraised hand, then said slowly, with a painful effort to sober himself: "You're—mistaken, Jarvis. She's an honest girl and a good one, too good for me. You mus' 'pologize."

The elder man breathed an oath. "She's a blackmailer, and so is—this person. Oh, don't look hurt, my friend." He froze Jim with a glare. "Merkle told me how you tried to work your sister off on him. When you couldn't make that go you grabbed the next best man, eh? It's true, Bob; she's a stalking horse for her whole damned family."

Bob centered his eyes laboriously upon the speaker, then said distinctly: "We've been good friends, Jarvis; you're a kind of an uncle to me, but—you're a liar. You've lied 'bout my wife, so I 'spose I've got to lick you." With a backward kick he sent his overturned chair flying, then made for Hammon. But Jim seized him by the arm; Lorelei sprang in front of him.

"Mr. Whar—Bob," she cried. "You mustn't—for my sake." The three scuffled for an instant until Hammon said, more quietly:

"I couldn't fight with you, Bob—you're like my own son. But you've been sold out, and—and it looks as if I'd been sold out, too. Now go home and sleep. I didn't come here to quarrel with you; I have a matter of my own to settle." He laid a hand on Bob's shoulder in an effort to pacify him, but the young man's indignation flared

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into life with drunken persistence. It was Lorelei who at last prevailed upon her husband to leave peaceably, and she was about to accompany him when Lilas Lynn checked her.

During this angry scene Lilas had not risen nor spoken, but had sat with her elbows upon the table, her chin resting upon her interlocked fingers, obviously enjoying it all. Her eyes were very black and very brilliant against her pallor, and she was smiling derisively.

"Wait!" she interposed. "I'm not going to stay here with this old—fool."

Hammon grew purple; he ground his teeth.

"You *shall* stay. We're going to have a talk and settle things once for all."

"See? He's going to settle me."

"Nonsense. I mean—"

"He's liable to harm me." Lilas's words were directed as an appeal to the others, but her eyes mocked Hammon. "Jim, dear, you won't leave me alone?"

Jimmy, not relishing in the least this attempt to goad the millionaire, remained silent, but no words from him were needed.

"We've got to have an understanding, right now," stormed Hammon, "so clear 'em out. Clear 'em out, I say."

Lilas rose swiftly with a complete change of manner; she was smiling no longer; her face was sinister.

"Very well," she agreed. "To-night. Why not? But I want Lorelei to stay and—hear. Yes."

"No, I don't want her."

"I do." Lilas's bad temper flared up promptly from the hot coals of a spiteful drunken stubbornness. "She'll stay till you go, or else I'll put you out too. I don't trust you." She laughed disagreeably.

"Then have your way. It's you I want to talk with, anyhow, drunk as you are. Now, Bob—will you say good

night?" He waved the two men from the room, and the outer door closed behind them.

Lorelei had little desire to remain as the witness to a distressing scene, but she seized upon the delay, for even a sordid lovers' quarrel was preferable to the caresses of a sodden bridegroom. But daylight seemed a long way off—she feared Bob would not fall asleep during this brief respite.

"Now come with me, if you please." Hammon turned in the direction of the library, and Lilas followed, pausing to light a cigarette with a studied indifference that added feul to his rage. Lorelei seated herself at the disordered dining-table and stared miserably at the wall.

"Well?" said Hammon, when he and Lilas were alone. "Is this how you live up to your promises?"

"How did you know I went out to-night?" she inquired in her turn.

"I had you watched. After what happened last night I was suspicious. I've been waiting for hours—while you were out with that grafter, drinking, carousing—"

He bent toward her, white with fury, but she blew the smoke from her cigarette into his face, and he checked himself, staring at her strangely. For the first time he forgot his own injured feelings and perceived the insolent defiance in her expression. It took him aback, for in all his aggressive, violent life of conquest no one had ever defied him, no one had ever insulted him nor deliberately set about rousing his ire. But Lilas, he saw, was doing so, and with a purpose. There was more in this woman's bearing, he decided, than reckless defiance—there was an intentional challenge and a threat. Therefore with an effort he governed himself, recoiling in surprise.

She had seated herself upon the edge of the reading-table, one foot swinging idly. She watched him with a brooding, insolent amusement.

"Are you just drunk," he said, uncertainly, "or—have you completely lost your senses?"

"Yes, I'm drunk, but I know what I'm doing. I went out last night, and you warned me. I went out again to-night and— Oh yes! I helped marry your friend's son to a show-girl. What are you going to do about it?"

"I—why, you mustn't talk like that; you're not yourself, Lilas." He ran his eyes over the luxurious little room; he wiped his face with a shaky hand, feeling that it was he who had lost his senses. "The wine is talking. When I asked you to marry me I never dreamed—"

"You never dreamed I'd disobey you, eh? Well, I didn't intend to so early." She laughed again. "Now I suppose you'll drop me. What?"

"There's nothing else to do, if this— But I can't imagine what possessed you."

She eyed him silently with an expression he could not fathom, then asked, "Tell me, do you really care for me?"

Jarvis Hammon was a virile, headstrong man; his world had come suddenly, inexplicably to an end. His voice was hoarse, as he answered:

"Do you think I'd have made a fool of myself if I hadn't? Do you think I'd have ruined myself?"

"Have you ruined yourself?" she interrupted, quickly.

"Not quite, perhaps; but what I've lost, what I've sacrificed, would have ruined most men. My home is gone, and my family—as you know—yes, and a good many other things you don't know about. Financially I'm not done for—"

"That's too bad."

"Eh?"

She motioned him to proceed.

"You've cost me dear enough, as money goes, for you've gotten into my brain, somehow. I was never foolish over women until I met you, but you made me lose my grip on things, and indirectly I paid high. I didn't care, though. I was glad. I wanted you at any price. I tried to change

the world around to suit me, and—now you've spoiled it all."

"That blackmail cost you something, didn't it?" He agreed, carelessly.

"And your wife's divorce will cost a lot more, won't it? You've squandered quite a fortune on me, too, haven't you?"

He was too bewildered by her expression to do more than stare.

"No woman could totally ruin you; you're too rich for that, but you're hit hard inside, so I guess the price is high enough." Lilas nodded with satisfaction. "Thank God, I'm through, and you'll never paw me over again!"

"I don't understand. What are you getting at?"

"I'll tell you. I never intended to marry you, Jarvis."

He started as if she had struck him.

"That's what I said," she reaffirmed, "and I'll tell you why. Look at me—close."

He did as she directed, but saw nothing, his mind being in chaos. It had been her intention to call Lorelei to witness this dramatic disclosure and thus enhance its effect, but in the excitement of the moment she forgot. "Look at me," she repeated. "I'm Lily Levinski."

"Levinski. A Jew?" he exclaimed, in naïve surprise.

"Yes. I'm Joe Levinski's girl. Don't you remember?"

Many times she had rehearsed this declaration, picturing the consternation, the dawning horror it would cause, and deriving a fierce, quivering pleasure from the anticipation, but the real effect was disappointing. Hammon only blinked stupidly, repeating:

"A Jew!" It was plain that the name meant nothing.

She slid down from her perch and approached him, crying roughly, "Don't you remember Joe Levinski?" Hammon shook his head. "He worked for you in the Bessemer plant of the old Kingman mill. Don't you remember?"

"There were four thousand men—"

"He was killed when the converter dumped. You were rushing the work. Do you remember now?" Her words came swift and shrill.

Hammon started; a frown drew his brows together. His mind groped back through the years and memory faintly stirred, but she gave him no leisure to speak.

"I was waiting outside with his dinner-bucket, along with the other women. I saw him go. I saw you kill him—"

"*Lilas!* Good God, are you crazy?" he burst forth.

"It was murder."

"Murder?"

"It was. You did it. You killed him." She had dropped her cigarette, and it burned a black scar into the rug at their feet. Hammon retreated a step, the girl followed with blazing eyes and words that were hot with hate. "You spilled that melted steel on him, and I saw it all. When I grew up I prayed for a chance to get even, for his sake and for the sake of the other hunkies you killed. You killed my mother, too, Jarvis Hammon, and made me a—a— You made me hustle my living in the streets, and go through hell to get it."

"Be quiet!" he commanded, roughly. "The thing's incredible—absurd. You—the daughter of one of my workmen—and a *Jew!*"

"Yes. Levinski—Lily Levinski. And you wanted to marry me," she gibed. "But I fooled you."

"I guess I—must be—out of my head. I never knew the man—there were thousands of them; accidents were common. But—you say—" He gathered his whirling thoughts, and, strangely enough, grew calm. "You say you prayed for a chance to get even— So, then, you've been humbugging— By God, I don't believe it!"

"It's true. It's true. It's true," shrilled the girl so hysterically that her voice roused Lorelei, sitting vacant-

eyed in the room down the hall, and brought her to her feet with ears suddenly strained. Lorelei could hear only a part of the words that followed, but the tones of the two voices drew her from her retreat and toward the front of the apartment.

"I went through the gutter, I was a girl of the streets," Lilas was saying. "Oh, you're not the first— At last I got on the stage and then—you came. I knew you; I thought I'd die when you first touched me—then I figured it all out, and—you were easy."

"Go on," he said, hoarsely.

"You were a bigger fool than I dreamed, but you were old and you didn't know women. I knew men, though—old men especially."

"You took my money—you let me support you!" cried Hammon, in bitter accusation.

"Oh, I did more than that. I planned everything that has happened to you, even that blackmail."

"Blackmail!" he shouted. "Did you—was that your—?" He grew suddenly apoplectic; his eyes distended and reddened with rage.

His dismay delighted her.

"Certainly," she smiled. "Half the money is in my bank at this minute—besides all the rest you've given me. Oh, I've got enough to live on without marrying you. Who do you think put your wife wise and gave her the evidence for her divorce, eh? Think it over."

As she watched the effect of her words Lilas felt that her satisfaction was now complete; the man's slack jaw, his staring, bloodshot eyes convinced her that this moment was all that she had wished it to be.

"You'll settle with her for a million, and then you'll settle with me for this." She indicated the elaborate apartment with a gesture. "You think this ends our affair, don't you? Well, it doesn't. Oh no! You can't cast me off. I'll drag you through the gutter where you

sent me, and you'll either marry me or—the courts and the newspapers will get all your letters. You can't buy them—the letters. I'm rich, understand? Do you remember those letters? You were very indiscreet—and—do you want me to quote them? The less said, the better, perhaps. Your wife will read them and your daughters—"

Jarvis Hammon roused himself at last. Surprise, incredulity, dismay gave place to fury, and, as in all primitive natures, his wrath took shape as an impulse to destroy.

"You'll—do that—eh?" His tone, his bearing were threatening. He advanced as if to seize her in his great hands, and only her quickness saved her.

"Don't touch me!" Her voice ended in a little shriek as she evaded a second effort to grasp her, and placed the table between them. "What do you—mean?"

But it seemed that she had done her work too well, for his answer was like the growl of a hungry beast. His eyes roved over the table for a weapon, and, reading his insane purpose, she cried again:

"Don't do that. I warn you—"

The nearest object chanced to be a crystal globe in which was set a tiny French clock—one of those library ornaments serving as timepiece and paperweight—over this his hand closed; he moved toward her.

"Put that down," she cried. He did not pause. "Put it—" She wrenched at the table drawer and fumbled for something. Hammon uttered a bellow and leaped at her.

It was a tiny revolver, small enough to fit into a man's vest pocket or a woman's purse, but its report echoed loudly. The noise came like a cannon-shot to the girl in the hall outside and brought a cry to her lips. Lorelei flung herself against the library door.

What she saw reassured her momentarily, for, although Lilas was at bay against a book-case, Hammon was rooted in his tracks. A strange, almost ludicrous expression of

surprise was on his face; he was staring down at his breast; the revolver lay on the floor between him and Lilas.

Lorelei gasped an incoherent question, but neither of the two who faced each other appeared to hear it or to notice her presence in the room.

"I told you to—keep off," Lilas chattered. Her eyes were fixed upon Hammon, but her outflung arms were pressed against the support at her back as if she felt herself growing weak. "You did it—yourself. I warned you."

The man merely remained motionless, staring. But there was something shocking in the paralysis that held him and fixed his face in that distorted mold of speechless amazement. Finally he stirred; one hand crept inside his waistcoat, then came away red; he turned, walked to a chair, and half fell upon it. Then he saw Lorelei's face, and her agonized question took shape out of the whirling chaos in his mind.

"Where's Bob?" he said, faintly. "Call him, please."

"You're—hurt. I'll telephone for a doctor; there's one in the house, and—and the police, too." Lorelei voiced her first impulse, then shrilly appealed to Lilas to do something. But Lilas remained petrified in her attitude of retreat; from the pallor that was whitening her cheeks now it might have been she who was in danger of death.

"Don't telephone," said Hammon, huskily. "You must do just as I say, understand? This mustn't get out, do you hear? I'm not—hurt. I'm all right, but—fetch Bob. Don't let him call a doctor, either, until I—get home. Now hurry—please."

Lorelei rushed to the outside door, restraining with difficulty a wild impulse to run screaming through the hall of the apartment building and so arouse the other tenants. But the wounded man's instructions had been terse and forceful, therefore she held herself in check.

Fortunately, the hall-man was not at his post, or without doubt he would have read tragedy in her demeanor. With skirts gathered high and breath sobbing in her throat, the girl fled up the stair to her own door, where she clung, ringing the bell frantically.

She could hear Bob's—her husband's voice inside, raised in the best of humor. Evidently he was telephoning.

"Yes. Two hours ago, I tell you. With book, bell, and candle. Sure, I'm happy—couldn't be otherwise, for I'm drunk and married. I knew you'd be glad. What? No; glad because I'm married."

Jim's footsteps sounded, his hand opened the door, then his arm flew out to his sister's support as she staggered in.

"*Sis!* What the devil?" he cried, aghast at sight of her.

"Something—dreadful."

Bob continued his cheerful colloquy over the wire. "Just got in from your nightly joy-ride, eh? Lucky I caught you. Say! Here she is now. We'll expect a marble clock with gilt cupids from you, Merkle— Want to say hello?" He lurched aside from the telephone as Lorelei snatched the receiver from his hand.

"Mr. Merkle," she cried.

"Hello! Yes. Is that you?" came Merkle's steady voice.

"Come quick—quick."

"What's wrong?" he demanded, with a sharp change of tone. "Has Bob—?"

"No, no. It's Mr. Hammon. He's down-stairs with—Lilas, and he's hurt—shot. I—I'm frightened."

She turned to find Bob and Jim staring at her.

"Come," she gasped. "I think he's—dying."

She led the way swiftly, and they followed.

CHAPTER XV

MERKLE found his chauffeur just closing the garage door, and three minutes later his car was sweeping westward through the Park like the shadow of some flying bird. The vagueness, the brevity of the message that had come to him out of the night made it terribly alarming. Hammon of all men! And at this time! Merkle's mind leaped to the consequences of the catastrophe, if catastrophe it proved. He remembered the issues raised by the sudden death of another associate—also a man of standing and the head of a great industrial combination—and the avalanche of misfortune that it had started. In that case death had been attributed to apoplexy, but when the truth leaked out it had created a terrible scandal. Fortunately, that man's business affairs had been well ordered, and, although his family had been ruined, his institutions had managed to survive the blow. But Jarvis Hammon's financial interests were in no condition to withstand a shock; for a long time many of them had been under fire. He had committed his associates to a program of commercial expansion, never too secure even under favorable conditions, and one, moreover, which had provoked a tremendous assault from rival steel manufacturers. Now, with Hammon himself stricken at the crisis of the struggle, there was no telling what results might follow.

But Merkle's apprehensions were by no means as purely selfish as his immediate train of thought might imply; nor were they by any means confined to the

probable cost in dollars and cents of his associate's death. Hammon and he had been friends for many years; they shared a mutual respect and affection, and, although Merkle was eminently practical and unemotional, he prayed now as best he could that this alarm might be false, and that Hammon might not be grievously injured. Meanwhile he wedged himself into the cushions of the reeling car and urged his driver to more speed.

As the machine drew up to the Elegancia, Jimmy Knight leaped to the running-board and said hurriedly:

"Send your driver away."

Merkle did as he was directed, realizing his worst fears. When he and Jim stood alone on the walk he inquired weakly, "Is he—dead?"

Jim shook his head, and Merkle saw that he was deeply agitated. "No. But he's got a bullet in his chest."

"Did she—did that woman—?" Merkle laid a bony hand upon Jim's arm, and his fingers clutched like claws.

"I—don't know. He says he did it himself, and she won't talk. He declares it's only a scratch, and won't let us telephone for a doctor or for an ambulance. He's afraid of the police and—he's waiting for you."

Merkle hurried toward the entrance, but Jim halted him, and by the light from within it was plain that the latter was fairly palsied with fright. "For God's sake be careful! D-don't let the hall-man suspect. Lorelei was with 'em when it happened, and if it's—murder she'll be in it. Understand? She says she didn't see it, but she was there."

Together the men entered the building and at the first ring were admitted to Apartment Number One by Lorelei herself. She led them straight into the library.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour had elapsed since the shooting, but Jarvis Hammon still sat in the big chair. He was breathing quietly. Bob Wharton stood beside him.

"John!" The iron-master smiled pallidly as his friend came and knelt beside him. "You got here quickly."

"Are you badly hurt, Jarvis?"

"The damned thing is in here somewhere." Hammon took his hand away from his breast, and Merkle saw that the fingers were bloody. "Can you get me out of here quietly?"

John Merkle rose to his full height, his lips writhed back from his teeth. Harshly he inquired: "Where is that woman?"

"She's back yonder, in her room," Bob told him. "She's ill."

Merkle turned, but, reading his intent, Hammon checked him, crying in a strong voice: "None of that, John. I did it myself. It was an—accident."

"I don't believe it."

Hammon's eyes met those of his accuser; the two stared at each other steadily for a moment.

"It's true."

Merkle took a step and stooped for the revolver which had lain unnoticed until this moment. He held it in his hand.

"This isn't your gun," he said, quietly.

"No. It's hers. We had a quarrel. I— She intended to use it on herself. We fought for it—and in the struggle I set it off."

The other occupants of the room had listened breathlessly; now Lorelei stirred and Merkle read more than mere bewilderment in her face. He opened his lips, but the wounded man did not wait for him to speak.

"You *must* believe me!" he said, earnestly. "It's the truth, and I won't have Lilas involved—we've been a great deal to each other. To-night—I accused her wrongfully. It was all my fault—I'm to blame for everything." There was a pause. "I ruined her—you understand? I won't allow any scandal. Now get me out of here as

quietly and as quickly as you can. I'm really not hurt much. Come, come! There's nobody home except Orson and some of the kitchen help, and Orson is all right—the women are gone, you know. He'll get a doctor. It's a—bad business, of course, but I've thought it all out, and you must do exactly as I say."

The effort of this long speech told on the sufferer.

Sweat beaded his face; nevertheless, his jaws remained firmly set; his glance was purposeful, his big hands were gripped tightly over the arms of his chair. There was something superb, something terrible about his unchanging grimness.

Lorelei spoke timidly, for the first time. "But—the law, Mr. Merkle? The police—?"

"To hell with the law!" Jim burst out, nervously. "D'you want to go to court? D'you want to be up for murder? Lilas would saddle it onto you to save herself."

"Murder?" echoed Bob, with a start. "Jove!"

Jarvis Hammon cried furiously: "Don't be fools. There's no murder about it. I told you I shot myself accidentally. I'm not going to die."

"You *can't*—you *mustn't*," Merkle gravely agreed.

"Is your car outside, John?"

Merkle shook his head. He was thinking swiftly. "I wouldn't dare risk that, anyhow. The driver is a new man."

"Get a cab," Jim offered, in a panic.

"The cab-driver would be sure to—"

"I'll drive," Bob volunteered. "I'm drunk, but I've done it before when I was drunker. It's an old trick of mine—sort of a joke, see? Give me some money—a cabby 'll do anything for money at this time o' night."

Merkle eyed the speaker in momentary doubt, then handed him a roll of bank-notes. "It's a serious business, Bob, but—this is worse, and we've no time to lose—Jarvis can't stay here. There's somebody else to consider besides

us and—Miss Lynn. I'm thinking about Mrs. Hammon and the girls." Hammon groaned. "But we mustn't leave a trail, understand? Now go quickly, and—do the best you can." He followed Bob to the door and let him out. Instead of returning to the library, however, Merkle stepped swiftly down the hall, then, without knocking, opened the door to Lilas Lynn's bedroom and entered.

Lilas was busied at her dressing-table; an open traveling-bag jammed with articles of wearing-apparel stood on the bed. At his entrance she uttered a frightened cry and a silver spoon slipped from her nerveless fingers. Merkle saw also a little open box with several compartments, a glass of water, the cap of a pearl-and-gold fountain-pen, but took scant notice of them, being too deeply stirred and too much surprised at her appearance. She was no longer the vital, dashing girl he had known, but a pallid, cringing wreck of a woman. She shrank back at sight of him, babbling unintelligible words and cowering as if expecting a blow.

"Did you shoot him?" he asked, grimly.

Shivering, choking, speechless, Lilas stared at him. Her hair was disarranged; it hung in wisps and strings over her neck and brow; her eyes were dull and distended, like those of a person just recovering from the effects of an anesthetic. It was doubtful if she even recognized him. A repetition of his question brought no reply.

Seizing her roughly, he shook her, muttering savagely:

"If I were sure, by God, I'd strangle you!"

She remained limp; her expressionless stare did not change.

Merkle heard a stir behind him and found Jimmy Knight's blanched face peering in at him. Even fright could not entirely rob the younger man's features of their sly inquisitiveness.

"Mr. Hammon's calling you," said Jim, then blinked at the wretchedly disheveled woman.

"Here!" Merkle beckoned him with a jerk of his head. "This girl must get away from here. She'll ruin everything in her condition. Try to put her in some kind of shape while Lorelei packs her bag. We had better get her out of the country if we can."

Jim's quick eyes took in the articles on the dressing-table. "Ha! Dope," he exclaimed. "She's a coker—she's filled herself up. But, say—you don't really think she—did it, do you?"

"I don't know what to think. It's just as bad, either way. Hammon's wife and daughters must never know. Now, quick. See what you can do with her."

Merkle returned to the library, sent Lorelei in to her brother's assistance, then scanned his friend's face anxiously. But Hammon had not moved; the sweat still stood upon his lips and forehead, his jaws were still set like stone.

"No scandal, John," he exclaimed. "No scandal—whatever happens—on account of my girls."

"You're worse hit than you'll admit," Merkle said, gently.

"No, no. I'm all right. I'm not even suffering." His pallor belied his words, but he went on with even better self-control than Merkle's: "There's paper and ink yonder. Take these notes, will you? Things are in bad shape on the Street, and—you never can tell what may happen, so we'd better play safe."

Merkle seated himself and took the wounded man's dictation as best he could; but his hand shook badly.

From down the hall came hysterical moanings as Lilas Lynn struggled in a drugged and drunken breakdown.

The moments dragged interminably.

Several months before, Bob Wharton during one of his hilarious moments had conceived the brilliant notion of hiring a four-wheeler and driving a convivial party of friends from place to place. The success of his exploit had

been so gratifying that he had repeated the performance, but he was in a far different mood now as he left the Elegancia. The shock of Lorelei's announcement, the sight of his stricken friend, had sobered him considerably, yet he was not himself by any means. At one moment he saw and reasoned clearly, at the next his intoxication benumbed his senses and distorted his mental vision. These periods alternated with some regularity, as if the wine-fumes rose in waves; but he centered his attention upon the task ahead of him and hastened his sluggish limbs.

One word—"murder"—stuck in his memory; it kept repeating itself. He remembered Jimmy Knight's sentence directed at Lorelei. "D'you want to go to court?"

Lorelei was his wife, Bob reflected, dizzily—quite clearly he remembered marrying her. It was plainly as necessary, therefore, to shield her as to remove Jarvis Hammon and smother this accident. Or was it an accident, after all? Perhaps Lilas had shot the fellow. If that were true, then she ought to be arrested—certainly. But somebody had said, "She'll saddle it onto Lorelei to save herself." After all, it couldn't be murder, for hadn't Hammon said that he shot himself? Bob decided there could be no such need for haste, now that the truth was known, so he slackened his zigzag progress. If nobody had been murdered, why hire a cab at all? Then he began to run again, remembering that Hammon needed a doctor. This was a fine wedding night, indeed. For once in his life he wished himself sober.

Broadway, that pulsating artery of New York life, was still flowing a thin stream of traffic despite the lateness of the hour, and Bob's mind had become clearer by the time he reached it.

He signaled to the first horse-drawn vehicle that passed, but it was occupied, and the driver paid no heed to his call. Several taxi-cabs whirled past, both north and south

bound, but he knew better than to hire them, so he waited as patiently as he could while those billows of intoxication continued to ebb and flow through his brain, robbing him of that careful judgment which he fought to retain.

At last the *clop-clop-clop* of a horse's hoofs sounded close by, and an unshaven man in an ancient high hat steered a four-wheeler to the curb, barking: "Keb, keb!"

Bob lurched forward and laid a hand upon the driver's knee. "Very man I'm lookin' for." The hiccup that followed was by no means intentional.

"Yes, sir. Where to, sir?"

But Bob shook his head vigorously and waved a comprehensive gesture toward the west. "Got a party of my own back yonder—everybody soused but me—understand? I'm the only sober one, so I'm goin' to drive 'em home, see? How much?"

"How much for what?" demanded the cabman.

"For the cab—one hour. I'll bring it back."

"Nothin' doin'! I'll take you where you want to go."

"Sorry. Mus' have my little joke, no matter what it costs. Next cabby 'll do it."

Nothing except Bob's personal appearance prevented the driver from whipping up without more ado, but a shiny top-hat, an immaculate expanse of shirt-bosom, and silken waistcoat, especially when linked with a spendthrift air, command respect from the cab-driving brotherhood. The night was old—and these jokers sometimes pay well, the man reflected.

"How'd I know you'd bring it back?" he inquired.

"Matter of honor with me. I'll be back in no time. Will ten dollars be right?"

"Hop in, Mister. I'll drive you an' your friends to Philadelphy for ten dollars," the cabby offered, invitingly.

But Bob was obdurate. "I'll make it fifteen, and you can lend me your coat and hat. We'll exchange—have to, or no joke. Is it a go?"

The offer was tempting, but the driver cannily demanded Wharton's name and address before committing himself. The card that Bob handed him put an end to the parley; he wheeled into the side-street and removed his long nickel-buttoned coat and his battered tile, taking Bob's broadcloth garment and well-blocked hat in return.

"First one o' these I ever had on," he chuckled. "But it's a bit cool for shirt-sleeves, ain't it? Mind now, if you get lost give the horse his head and he'll find the stable, but don't run 'im. If you ain't back in an hour I'll know you've got a puncture. Ha! In the mornin' I'll take these glad rags to Charley Voice's hotel, eh?"

"Right! The Charlevoix. But I'll be back." Bob drove away with a parting flourish of his whip.

The elevator was in its place, the hall-man was dozing, with heels propped upon the telephone switchboard, when Wharton entered the Elegancia and rang the bell of Lilas Lynn's apartment; but a careless glimpse of the glittering buttons and the rusty hat sent the attendant back into his drowse.

Once Bob had gained admittance little time was wasted. He and Merkle helped Hammon to his feet, then each took an arm; but the exertion told, and Jarvis hung between them like a drunken man, a gray look of death upon his face.

"Watch out for the door-man," Jimmy Knight cautioned for the twentieth time. "Make him think you've got a souse."

"Aren't you coming along?" asked Bob.

But Jim recoiled. "Me? No. I'll stay and help Lilas make her get-away."

Merkle nodded agreement. "Don't let her get out of your sight, either, understand? There's a ship sailing in the morning. See that she's aboard."

Jarvis Hammon spoke. "I want you all to know that I'm entirely to blame and that I did this myself. Lilas

is a—good girl." The words came laboriously, but his heavy brows were drawn down, his jaw was square. "I was clumsy. I might have killed her. But she's all right, and I'll be all right, too, when I get a doctor. Now put that pistol in my pocket, John. Do as I say. There! Now I'm ready."

The hall-man of the Elegancia was somewhat amused at sight of the three figures that emerged from Miss Lynn's apartment, and surmised that there had been a gay time within, judging from the condition of the old man in the center. Theatrical people were a giddy lot, anyhow. Since there was no likelihood of a tip from one so deeply in his cups, the attendant did not trouble to lend a hand, but raised his heels to the switchboard and dozed off again.

Bob Wharton mounted the box and drove eastward across Broadway, through the gloomy block to Columbus Avenue and on to Central Park West, the *clop-clop-clop* of the horse's feet echoing lonesomely in the empty street. At Sixty-seventh Street he wheeled into the sunken causeway that links the East and West sides.

Once in the shadows, Merkle leaned from the door, crying softly, "Faster! Faster!"

Bob whipped up, the horse cantered, the cab reeled and bounced over the cobblestones, rocking the wounded man pitifully.

To John Merkle the ride was terrible, with a drunkard at the reins and in his own arms a perhaps fatally injured man, who, despite the tortures of that bumping carriage, interspersed his groans with cries of "Hurry, Hurry!" But, while Merkle was appalled at the situation and its possible consequences, he felt, nevertheless, that Hammon had acted in quite the proper way. In fact, for a manly man there had been no alternative, regardless of who had fired the shot. It was quite like Jarvis to do the generous, even the heroic, thing when least expected.

Whatever Hammon might have been, he was in the last analysis all man, and Merkle admired his courage. He was glad that Hammon had thought of those three women who bore his name, even if they bore him no love, and he took courage from his friend's plucky self-control. Perhaps the wound was not serious, after all. Hammon's death would mean the ruin of many investors, a general crash, perhaps even a wide-spread panic, and, according to Merkle's standards, these catastrophes bulked bigger than the unhappiness of women, the fall of an honored name, or death itself.

When he felt the grateful smoothness of Fifth Avenue beneath the wheels he leaned forth a second time and warned Bob, "Be careful of the watchman in the block."

The liquor in Bob was dying; he bent downward to inquire, "Is he all right?"

Merkle nodded, then withdrew his head.

The Hammon residence has changed owners of late, but many people recall its tragic associations and continue to point it out with interest. It is a massive pile of gray stone, standing just east of Fifth Avenue, and its bronze doors open upon an exclusive, well-kept side-street. As the cab swung in sight of the house Wharton, seeing a gray-clad figure near by, drove past without pausing and turned south on Madison Avenue. He made a complete circuit of the block, meditating with sobering effect upon the risk he was running. His heart was pounding violently when the street unrolled before him for a second time. At the farther corner, dimly discernible beneath the radiance of a street-light, he made out the watchman, now at the end of his patrol. The moment was propitious; there could be no further delay.

Bob reined in and leaped from his box. Merkle had the cab door open and was hoisting Hammon from his seat.

"Have you got the key?" Bob asked, swiftly.

"Yes. Help me! He's fainted, I think."

They lifted the half-conscious man out, then with him between them struggled up the steps; but Hammon's feet dragged; he hung very heavy in their arms.

Merkle was not a strong man; he was panting, and his hands shook as he fumbled with the lock. The key escaped him and tinkled upon the stone.

"Hurry! Here comes the watchman." Bob was gazing over his shoulder at the slowly approaching figure. The watchman had his eyes fixed upon the old-fashioned vehicle and its dejected animal, wondering, no doubt, what brought such an antiquated rig into this most exclusive neighborhood. He was within a few numbers of the Hammon house before Merkle solved the mysteries of the lock and the heavy portals swung open. In another instant the door had closed noiselessly, and the three were shut off from the street by a barricade of iron grillwork and plate glass. Both Bob and Merkle were weak from the narrowness of their escape, but the way was still barred by another door, through which two elaborate H's worked into French lace panels showed pallidly.

A second but briefer delay, and they stood in the gloom of the marble foyer hall. Then they shuffled across the floor to the great curving stairway. Both of Hammon's friends knew the house well, and, guided only by their sense of touch, they labored upward with their burden. The place was still, tomb-like; only the faint, measured ticking of a clock came to them.

Hammon had assured them that there would be no one in the house except Orson, his man, and some of the kitchen servants, the others having followed their mistress to the country; nevertheless the rescuers' nerves were painfully taut, and they tried to go as silently as burglars. It was hard, awkward work; they collided with unseen objects; their arms ached with the constant strain; when they finally gained the library they were drenched with

perspiration. Merkle switched on the lights; they deposited the wounded man on a couch and bent over him.

Hammon was not dead. Merkle felt his way into the darkened regions at the rear and returned with a glass of spirits. Under his and Bob's ministrations the unconscious man opened his eyes.

"You got me here, didn't you?" he whispered, as he took in his surroundings. "Now go—everything is all right."

"We're not going to leave you," Merkle said, positively.

"No!" echoed Bob. "I'll wake up Orson while John telephones the doctor."

But Hammon forbade Bob's movement with a frown. It was plain that despite his weakness his mind remained clear.

"Listen to me," he ordered. "Prop me up—put me in that chair. I'm choking." They did as he directed. "That's better. Now, you mustn't be seen here—either of you. We can't explain." He checked Merkle. "I know best. Go home; it's only two blocks—I'll telephone."

"You'll ring for Orson quick?"

Hammon nodded.

"Rotten way to leave a man," Bob mumbled. "I'd rather stick it out and face the music."

"Go, go! You're wasting time." Hammon's brow was wrinkled with pain and anger. "You've been good; now hurry."

Merkle's thin face was marked with deep feeling. "Yes," he agreed. "There's nothing else for us to do; but tell Orson to 'phone me quick. I'll be back here in five minutes." Then he and Bob stole out of the house as quietly as they had stolen in.

They got into the cab and drove away without exciting suspicion. Merkle alighted two blocks up the avenue and sped to his own house; Bob turned his jaded nag westward through the sunken road that led toward the Elegancia and Lorelei.

The owner of the equipage was waiting patiently, and there still lacked something of the allotted hour when the exchanged garments had been transferred to their respective owners. Bob walked toward the Elegancia with a feeling of extreme fatigue in his limbs, for the effort to conquer his intoxication had left him weak; he dimly realized also that he was still far from sober.

There was no answer when he rang at Lilas Lynn's apartment; the hall-boy volunteered the information that the occupant had just gone out with a gentleman. Miss Knight? Yes, she was up-stairs, he supposed. But when Bob undertook to go up there was prompt objection. The attendant would not hear to such a thing until he had first called Miss Knight. Even Lorelei's halting assurance that the gentleman was indeed her husband did not wholly satisfy, and it was with a suspicious mien that the man finally gave way.

Bob was surprised at his wife's apparent self-control when she let him in. Except for the slim hand pressed to her bosom and the anxiety lurking in her deep blue eyes she might have just come from the theater. Those eyes, he noted, were very dark, almost black, under this emotional stress; they questioned him, mutely.

"We got him home all right," he told her, when they stood facing each other in the tiny living-room.

"Will he live?"

"Oh yes. He says he's not badly hurt, and Merkle agrees. Lord! we'd never left him alone if we'd thought—"

"I'm glad. When the telephone rang I thought—it was the police."

"There, there!" he said, comfortingly, seeing her tremble. "I won't let anybody hurt you. I was terribly drunk—things are swimming yet—but all the way across town I couldn't think of anything, anybody except you and what it would mean to you if it got out."

"It will get out, I'm sure. Such things always do."

He eyed her gravely, kindly, with an expression she had never seen upon his face.

"Then—we'll face it together," he said.

After a moment her glance drooped, a faint color tinged her cheeks. "I—wouldn't dare face it alone. I couldn't. But you're tired—sick." He nodded. "You must lie down and sleep, and get to be yourself again— We can't tell what may happen now at any moment."

"It's the reaction, I suppose. I'm all in. And you?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep if I tried. I feel as if I'd never be able to sleep again. I—I'll sit and watch and—wait."

CHAPTER XVI

THAT afternoon Mrs. Knight, in a great flutter of excitement, arrived with Jim at the Elegancia. Embracing her daughter in tremulous, almost tearful delight, she burst forth:

"You *dear!* You *darling!* Jim came home not an hour ago and told me everything. I thought I should swoon."

"Told you—everything?" Lorelei flashed a glance at her brother, who made a quick sign of reassurance.

"Yes. Peter is so happy—he's better already, and wants to meet Robert. You know neither of us have seen our new son—that's what he's going to be, too—a real son, like Jim. But I think you *might* have telephoned." She checked her exuberance to inquire, in a stage whisper that carried through the flat, "Is the dear boy here?"

"Sure! Where's brother Bob?" echoed Jim.

"He went home to change his clothes and to telegraph his people."

"But how strange—how *terrible* you look!"

Jim volunteered an explanation. "Remember, ma, we were up all night, and it was *some* wedding party. Pipe me. I look like a wreck on the Erie."

"And to think that while Lilas was out enjoying herself with you poor Mr. Hammon was lying with a bullet in him. I *never* had such a shock as when I read the extras. You've seen them?" Lorelei nodded—indeed, the room was strewn with newspapers. "They say it was accidental—but pshaw!" Mrs. Knight shrugged knowingly.

"Don't you think it was?"

"My dear! Think of his family troubles and financial worries!"

"That's the general talk," Jim agreed. "Things were boiling when the market closed. All of his stocks are away off. Well, I don't blame him."

"Yes, and he'd quarreled with Lilas, too. That's why she sailed for Europe this morning." Mrs. Knight's hard eyes glittered, her sharp nose seemed to lengthen. "I'll warrant she knows a lot more than she'll tell. I'd like to question her, and I will when— Lorelei! You're as white as a sheet. Are you ill?"

"No. Only—everything came at once. It was a—long night."

Jim sighed wearily. "Deliver me from hysterical fluffs like Lilas. I'd rather load a cargo of boa-constrictors than start her for the briny."

What with Lorelei's good fortune and Lilas's catastrophe Mrs. Knight was well-nigh delirious. It was not often that she could roll two such delicious morsels under her tongue, and she patently gloried in the opportunity for gossip. She ended a period of chatter by saying:

"It just goes to show that a girl must be careful. If Lilas had behaved herself she'd have been married and rich like you. Oh, I *can't* believe it has come true! Think of it yourself, dearie; I—I'm nearly out of my head." She dabbed at her moistening eyes, becoming more and more excited as she dwelt upon the family's sudden rise to affluence. She was still rejoicing garrulously when Lorelei burst into one of her rare passions of weeping and buried her face in her hands.

"Child alive!" cried her astonished mother. "What ails you?"

Instantly Jim's suspicions caught fire.

"Say! Has Bob welched?" he demanded, harshly.

The amber head shook in negation.

"Isn't he—nice to you?" quavered Mrs. Knight.

"Yes. But—I'm sorry I did it. He was drinking; he didn't know what he was doing—"

"Hush!" Mrs. Knight cast a fearful glance over her shoulder. "It was all straight and aboveboard, and he knew perfectly well what he was about. Jim would swear to it."

Lorelei lifted a tragic, tear-stained face. "I ought to be hanged," she said.

Jim laughed with relief. "There's gratitude for you! If I had your share of the Wharton coin I'd let 'em hang *me*—for a while."

"There, there!" Mrs. Knight chided her daughter. "You're worn out, and no wonder; but everything is lovely. I'm dying to meet Robert's mother, now that we have so much in common. I'm sure I'll like her, although I can't see what pleasure she can get from *giving* away money. Why, she's simply robbing Bob's family when she throws her thousands to charity, and I intend to tell her so, too, in a nice way, the first chance I get. Of course, you'll quit the Revue to-night. That 'll be a relief, won't it? Has Robert given you anything yet? They say he's terribly generous."

"I can't quit right away, now that Lilas has left. But I dare say Bob won't let me work very long."

"Indeed! I should hope not." Mrs. Knight's chin lifted. "If I were you I'd never go near Bergman's theater again. Let him sue you."

Jim eyed his sister admiringly. "You're a dandy crier, Sis," he observed. "Your nose doesn't swell and your eyes don't pop out. You could sob your way right into the Wharton family if you tried." He lit a cigar, sighed gratefully, and, dragon-like, emitted twin columns of smoke from his nostrils. "Hannibal Wharton is worth twenty millions easy," he went on, complacently; "maybe forty. We didn't do so badly—for country yaps—did we? It feels mighty good to be in the kale-patch. No more small change for yours truly. But, say—it was a battle!"

Mrs. Knight ran down slowly, like a clock. This sudden and unexpected triumph had gone to her head; she could talk only of dollars and cents. In her fancy she juggled huge sums of money; she drew extravagant pictures of a glittering future in which the whole family figured. Throughout this sordid chatter, with its avaricious gloatings and endless repetitions, Lorelei sat listless, her thoughts far from pleasant. It had required this final touch to make her fully feel her wretchedly false position.

As mother and son were leaving, Jim managed to get a word in private with his sister.

"Don't weaken," he cautioned her. "Lynn's gone, and it's all over. We've got the whip-hand on all of 'em—Hammon, Merkle, Bob, Lilas—everybody. We've got 'em all, understand? We've landed *big!*"

When she was alone Lorelei gave a sigh of relief, which changed to a sob as the sense of her helplessness surged over her again. She was worn out, and yet she could not rest. She longed for the open air, and yet she dreaded to show herself abroad, fearing that some one would read her secret. Thoughts of the evening performance at the theater filled her with unfamiliar misgivings—she wondered if she could appear in public without breaking down. *She* knew well enough who had fired that shot—would others fail to suspect? The secrecy in which the whole affair was veiled seemed terribly artificial; it was impossible that such a barefaced conspiracy to suppress the truth could long remain undiscovered. And—if Hammon died, what then? He was reported to be very low; suppose he became delirious and betrayed himself? She would be involved—and Merkle and Bob.

Every clang of the elevator gate, every footfall outside her door alarmed her. As with most women, her knowledge of the law was negligible, her conception of its workings was grotesquely child-like.

Yet, after all, the incidents of the shooting affected her

SHE wearily wondered where the new road led—surely not to happiness.

less than the amazing change in her own fortunes; she was a wife. The word sounded shockingly unreal. This was no longer her home, her sanctuary; another had equal share in it. She no longer belonged to herself: another—possessed her. And, worst of all, that other was practically a stranger. She felt her cheeks burn; she was suffocated by a sense of shame from which there was no escape. In one night she had passed the turning-point from girlhood to womanhood, from womanhood to wifehood, and there had been no love, no faith, no glamour even, in the act. She had deliberately sold herself; she wearily wondered where the new road led—surely not to happiness.

Toward evening Adorée Demorest telephoned, and with many anticipatory exclamations of pleasure invited Lorelei to dine.

"I can't," answered Lorelei, faintly.

"Bother your engagements!" Miss Demorest's disappointment was keen.

"I can't even explain, unless—you'll come here."

"To dinner?"

Lorelei decided swiftly. She dreaded to be alone with Bob; her constraint in his presence was painful, and he also, before going out, had appeared very ill at ease. He had not even made plans for the evening meal. In view of all this she answered:

"Yes, to dinner. Please, please come."

"What *is* the matter?"

"I'll—tell you later."

Miss Demorest yielded, not without some regret. "I was going to cook the supper myself, and I'm all done up like a sore foot; but I'll remove the bandages. I suppose you know the potatoes are peeled and the salad will spoil unless I bring it?"

"Then bring it, and hurry."

Lorelei was not quite sure that Bob would consent to

dine in the modest little home, but under the circumstances idleness was maddening, so she fell to work. It seemed very odd, when she thought of it, for the bride of a millionaire to prepare a meal with her own hands, but anything was preferable to dining out, in her present frame of mind. This was very different from what she had expected, but—everything was different. Once the marriage had become known to Bob's people and he had thoroughly sobered down, once she had withdrawn from the cast of the Revue, their real life would begin.

Bob was pale and a bit unsteady when he arrived, but Lorelei saw that he suffered only from the effects of his previous debauch. He was extremely self-conscious and uneasy in her presence, though he kissed her with a brave show of confidence.

"I galloped into the bank just as they slammed the doors," he explained, "but my bookkeeping is rotten."

"Yes?"

"My accounts somehow never tally with theirs, and they always explain very patiently—it's a patient bank—that they use adding-machines. Beastly nuisance, this constant figuring, especially when you never hit the right answer. But a man can't expect to compete with one of those mechanical contraptions."

"Are you trying to tell me that you have overdrawn?"

"Exactly. But I drew against the old gentleman, as usual, so on with the dance. What's the—er—idea of the apron?"

"It's nearly dinner-time."

Bob's eyes opened with surprise. "Why, we're going to Delmonico's."

"I'd—rather do this if you don't mind." She eyed him appealingly. "I don't feel equal to going out tonight. I'm—afraid."

"Don't you keep a maid?" he inquired.

"Where would I keep her—in the ice-box?" Lorelei smiled faintly.

His glance brightened with admiration. "Well, you look stunning in that get-up, and I'd hate to see you change it. Do you mean to say you can *cook?*"

"Not well, but I can fry almost anything. Mother has a maid. I couldn't afford two."

"I love fried things," he assured her, with a twinkle. "And to think you're going to cook for *me!* That's an experience for both of us. Let's have some fried roast beef and fried corn on the cob with fried salad and cheese—"

"Don't tease," she begged, uncertainly. "I hardly know what I'm doing, and I thought this would keep me busy until theater-time."

He extended a hand timidly and patted her arm, saying with unexpected gentleness:

"Please don't worry. I supposed we'd dine in public, but if you like this better, so do I. When we pull ourselves together and get settled a bit we'll make our plans for the future. At present I'm still in a daze. It was a terrible night for all of us. When I think of it I'm sure it must have been a dream. I saw Merkle; he's perfectly cold and matter-of-fact about it all. He got back to Hammon's house ahead of the doctor, and nobody suspects the truth. But the Street is in chaos, and all of Hammon's companies are feeling the strain. The shorts are running to cover, and there's a report that it was suicide, which makes things worse. It couldn't have happened at a more inopportune time, either. Dad's on his way from Pittsburg to help save Merkle's bank."

"Shouldn't you have been at business on such a day?"

Bob shrugged carelessly. "I'm only a 'joke' broker. The governor thinks a firm-name looks well on my cards. I hope he doesn't lose more than a million in this flurry—it won't improve his disposition. But—wait till he learns I've married a girl who can fry things— By the way—"

Bob paused. "I invited a friend to dine with us tonight."

Lorelei was less dismayed than he had expected. "So have I," she said.

"I thought it might be pleasanter for you," he explained, a bit awkwardly, "inasmuch as we're not very well—acquainted. I saw before I went out that you were—er—embarrassed—and—and—" He flushed boyishly, scarcely conscious of the delicacy that had prompted his action. "Anyhow, he's gone home to put on a clean sweater."

"You don't mean you asked—?"

"Campbell Pope; yes. I met him, and he looked hungry. He's coming here at six." For almost the first time in Bob's society Lorelei laughed out clearly.

"And I asked Adorée Demorest," she said.

Bob grinned and then laughed with her. "Fine!" he cried. "Both members of this club. Really, this ought to make the best finish fight seen in New York for many a day."

"I don't care," Lorelei said, stubbornly. "Adorée is the most misjudged person in America, and Pope ought to know the truth."

As she flitted back and forth preparing dinner Bob kept up a ceaseless chatter that did much to lessen their constraint. She was conscious through it all of his admiration, but it still seemed to be the admiration of a stranger, not of a husband; never for one moment had either of them felt the binding force of their new relationship; never had they been farther apart than now.

Adorée's surprise at finding Robert Wharton in her friend's apartment was intense, and when she learned the truth she was for once in her life speechless. She could only stare from one to the other, wavering between consternation and delight. Finally she sat down limply.

"I—I'd have brought a present if I'd known," she managed to say.

"DON'T kill him; just stay and spoil his dinner,"
rest's countenance. "I'll do it—he's spoiled many
I'm distilling poison like a cobra." She seized the

Lorelei urged. Determination gleamed in Miss Demo- a dinner for me. But give me room. Don't touch me gleaming bread-knife.

"Are you going to wish us luck?" Bob inquired.

"Luck! You've both got it. She's the best girl in the world, and you're—" Adorée hesitated, and continued to stare, round-eyed. "I didn't think you'd—I didn't think she'd—I don't know what I thought or didn't think. But—Jimminy! *Married!*" When Lorelei led her into the bedroom to lay off her wraps the thunderstruck young woman had more nearly recovered herself. "Why, he's worth millions," she exclaimed, in a whisper—"*billions!* I don't know how to talk to him—or you, for that matter. Shall I call you 'my Lady' or 'your Honor,' or—"

"You knew how to talk to him that night of the supper."

"And to think you married him after what hap—I'm going to slap the very first millionaire *I* meet—maybe he'll propose to me." She was suddenly dismayed. "Why, I can't afford to buy *you* a wedding-gift—you'll expect a diamond sunburst or a set of sea-otter. I didn't dress for dinner either; I suppose I should have worn the crown jools"

"You're going to wear an apron and help me scorch the dinner," Lorelei laughed.

"You—*cooking*, with a billionaire husband!" Adorée gasped. "Am I dreaming? Why don't you dine aboard his yacht, or—buy the Plaza and have dinner served in the lobby? You *cooking!* Why, you're going to have automobiles to match your dresses, and châteaux in France, and servants, and stables of polo-ponies, and a Long Island estate, and a hunting-lodge, and—and thousands of gowns, and a maid to put 'em on. She'll do it, too—when you're not looking." Miss Demorest paused, dazzled by the splendor of her own imaginings. "*You! Cooking!* Stop fidgeting and let me kiss you. There!"

As Lorelei explained the reasons for to-night's program, Adorée saw for the first time the weariness in her friend's eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, the tremulous droop of her lower lip. Seizing Lorelei by the shoulders, she held her off as the target for a searching gaze.

"Tell me, did they *make* you marry him?" she inquired, fiercely. It was plain to whom she referred.

"No."

"Whew! I'm glad to hear that. You love him, don't you?"

The answer came readily enough, and the blue eyes did not flinch, but the smile was a trifle fixed and the cheeks remained colorless.

"Why, of course. He's very nice."

"*Lorelei!*" Miss Demorest's fingers tightened; her voice was tragic, but she had no chance to say more, for Bob called just then from the living-room:

"Hurry back, girls. There's something burning, and I can't find the emergency brake."

When Adorée finally came forth in one of Lorelei's aprons—really a fetching garment, more like a house dress than an apron—Bob told her whom they were expecting as the other guest.

She paused with a bread-knife upraised.

"That—*viper?*" she cried.

"Campbell isn't a viper; he's a cricket—a dramatic cricket," declared Bob.

Adorée began to undo the buttons at her back, but Bob seized her hands.

"Let go. I'll blow up if I see that creature," she exclaimed, in a kind of subdued shout.

Argument proved vain until Lorelei told her firmly: "You owe it to yourself, dear. And we *won't* let you go."

The dancer ceased her struggles, her brows puckered. "Perhaps I do owe it to myself, as you say. Anyhow, I haven't taken a human life yet, and this is my chance."

"Don't kill him, just stay and spoil his dinner," Lorelei urged.

Determination gleamed in Miss Demorest's countenance. "I'll do it—he's spoiled many a dinner for me. But give me room. Don't touch me. I'm distilling

poison like a cobra." She seized the gleaming bread-knife and brandished it. "When the crisis comes, stand back."

"Seriously, now, Lorelei has told me everything, and I want Campbell to acknowledge his mistake," said Bob. "The public has swallowed that royalty hoax, but there's no use deceiving him."

Despite her show of bravery Adorée was panic-stricken when the bell rang and Bob went to the door to explain the change of plan and invite Pope in.

The latter could be heard saying: "That's fine. Me for a home-cooked dinner. Here's an unabridged cluster of orchids for Mrs. Wharton, too. If I'd had time I'd have brought you a hanging-lamp or a plush album decorated with sea-shells." He entered the living-room with a hand extended and a smile upon his lips, then halted as if frozen. By the time he had been introduced to Adorée he had burst into a gentle perspiration.

Certainly the personal appearance of the notorious dancer was sufficiently unexpected to shock him; she might have been anything rather than a king's favorite; she looked far more like a prim little housewife as she helped Lorelei with her homely tasks, and the incongruity affected Pope painfully. With involuntary suspicion he avoided her after his first stiff greeting; but his eyes followed her furtively, and he wandered slightly in his attention to Bob's chatter.

As for Miss Demorest, she took a grim delight in his discomfort, and prepared to blast him with sarcasm, to wither him with her contempt when the moment came. Meanwhile she listened as the two men talked, turning up her nose when Pope scored Broadway with his usual bitterness.

"He thinks that's smart," she reflected; but she, too, detested the Great Trite Way, and his words expressed her own distaste so aptly that she could think of no argument sufficiently biting to confound him. She deliberate-

ly framed a stinging reference to his pose in the matter of dress, though in frankness she had to admit that he wore his gray sweater vest with an air of genuine comfort and unconsciousness. Then she remembered, barely in time, that her own style in garments both on and off the stage was far more startling than his, and decided that she would merely be laying herself open to a disastrous counter-attack if she hurled her sarcasm in that direction; therefore she sought another opening. She had made up her mind to begin humbling his conceit by voicing her contemptuous regard for newspaper men in general when he once more forestalled her by giving crisp expression to the very sentiments she was rehearsing. Of course, it was all affectation, like his slovenly disregard of fashion—and yet, she was interested to hear him tell Bob:

"I don't like the business—never have. Every time I get some money ahead I quit it and try something else. Writing isn't a man's exercise, anyhow, and journalism is just a form of body-snatching. The average reporter is a ghoul."

"You don't do reporting," said Bob.

"No, I don't; but that's all a dramatic review ought to be—a news story. Why not have social critics to comment on society entertainments—or financial critics to roast unhealthy commercial enterprises and advertise safe ones? How long d'you think Wall Street would stand for that? Why don't the papers hire dry-goods experts to prowl through the department stores, publishing the cost prices of merchandise and warning the public against bargain sales? That's what we do. We ridicule and warn and criticize, but we never build up. The theatrical business is the only one that permits outside interference—as if the public couldn't tell a good play from a poor one. It wouldn't be so bad if we were always honest; but we're not: we have to be smart to hold our jobs.

We're like a patent dandruff cure—we don't cure, but we sting, and the public thinks we're beneficial."

Notwithstanding his garrulity, Pope was noticeably ill at ease. He was conscious of Miss Demorest's hostile eyes, and the pointed manner in which she ignored his presence was disquieting. He had the feeling that she was carefully measuring him and preparing herself to take revenge in some characteristic feminine manner. Knowing extremely little of women, he could not imagine what form that revenge would assume, and the uncertainty annoyed him. The dinner seemed slow in coming, conversation dragged, and, rising, he began to wander nervously about, canvassing his mind for some excuse to leave. Bob appeared to enjoy his lack of repose, and offered no relief. At last Pope turned to the piano and fluttered through the stack of sheet-music he found there.

"Do you play?" inquired Bob.

"Yes. Why?"

"You look as if you did—you're kind of—badly nourished. Know any rag-time?"

Pope shuddered. "I do not."

"Too bad! I was going to ask you to stir up the ivories."

"Nobody likes good music any more," growled the critic, seating himself upon the bench. His sensitive fingers idly rippled the length of the keyboard and a flood of melody filled the room.

"Say! You do know your way around, don't you? Can't you pick out 'Here Comes My Daddy Now' with one finger?"

The musician groaned. "What a pity!" After a moment he murmured, "I improvise a good deal." The instrument, perhaps for the first time in its life, began to vibrate and ring to something besides the claptrap music of the day. Once he had found a means of occupying himself, Pope surrendered to his impulse and in a measure forgot his surroundings.

A short time later Lorelei turned from the kitchenette to find Adorée Demorest poised, a salad-bowl in one hand, a wooden spoon gripped in the other, on her face a rapt expression of beatitude.

"Have you rubbed the dish with garlic?" inquired Lorelei.

Adorée roused herself slowly. "Lordy!" she whispered. "I'd give both legs to the knee and one eye if I could play like that. The mean little shrimp!"

The embers of her resentment were still glowing when the four finally seated themselves at the table. A furtive glance in Pope's direction showed that he was studiously avoiding her eyes: she prepared once more to begin the process of flaying him.

"You've been away for some time, haven't you?" Bob was asking.

Pope nodded. "I hate New York. I went as far away as I could get, and—I managed to return just two jumps ahead of the sheriff. It will take me six months to pay my debts. I'm a grand little business man."

"What was it this time? Mining?"

"No. Poultry." Adorée pricked up her ears.

"You went West, eh?" pursued Bob.

"No. East—Long Island. Did you know there are parts of the Island that are practically unexplored by civilized man? Well, there are. They're as remote from the influence of New York as the heart of New Guinea." Pope's thin lips parted in a smile. "The natives are all foreigners, too. There are Portuguese pickle-pickers and hairy-handed Hollanders who live with their heads lower than their knees, and weed-pulling wops who skulk in patches of cauliflower and lettuce, but as for American settlers—there ain't none."

Adorée complacently felt that she had the critic talking against time, and the consciousness of her disturbing influence over him gratified her intensely.

"Their language is a sort of Reverse English," Pope went on, "and it's a hard country to explore because of the dialects. Some of the people are flesh-eaters, but the price of poultry is so high and the freight on eggs is so low that most of them are vegetarians. That's what got me started, in the first place—I saw a great opportunity to make money; so I found a farm on a lake, bought it, and went to raising ducks."

"Ducks!" breathlessly exclaimed Miss Demorest; but her interruption went unnoticed.

Campbell Pope's features shone with the gentle light of a pleasurable remembrance. "It was lovely and quiet out there, just like Saskatchewan or the Soudan. Sometimes I fancied I must be close to the fringe of civilization, with the life of the outer world pulsing near at hand, for I could hear whispers of it; but I soon got over that idea. The local inhabitants were shy but friendly; they did me no harm. But—it was no place for ducks; they swam all over the pond and spent so much time catching bugs on the bottom that they had no leisure for family obligations on land."

This gloomy recital met with an interest that prompted him to continue, whimsically:

"There was no home life among those ducks—none whatever, but they could swim nearly as well as Miss Kellerman. They never took cramps, either, although they appeared to have chronic bronchitis; and they must have learned to breathe through their tails, because they stood on their heads for hours at a time—all I could see was acres of white tails sticking up like patches of Cubist pond-lilies. They swam all their fat off, and I had the pond dredged and never found an egg."

Miss Demorest giggled audibly; she had lost all interest in her food; she was tingling with excitement.

"Why didn't you fence them in?" she asked.

Pope eyed her for a fleeting instant, then his gaze wavered.

"I fenced in the whole pond to begin with. It nearly broke me."

"A duck shouldn't have much water. What kind were they?"

"Plymouth Rocks, or Holsteins, or Jersey Lilies—anyhow they were white."

"White Pekins!"

The critic frowned argumentatively. "What is a duck for if he isn't to swim? What is his object? We had six on my father's farm, and they swam all the time. Of course, six isn't many, but—"

"Naturally they didn't do well—"

"But they *did* do well—and quite naturally, too. They did beautifully, in fact. They never had an ache or a pain. What do you know about ducks?"

Adorée answered in a tone of calm and utter certainty: "I know everything. I've read hundreds, maybe thousands of duck books. I have a whole library of them."

"A duck library. I thought so. But did you ever own a library of ducks? There's a difference. A man doesn't have to know anything to write a book—I've done it myself. Practical experience is the thing."

"Did you keep cows for them?"

Pope stared at his inquisitor for a moment; then he explained with patient politeness: "These were not carnivorous ducks. They ate bugs and fish and corn."

"Corn!" Adorée was shocked, incredulous; her eyes glittered with the fire of fanaticism; she no longer saw in this man an enemy, a vile creature branded with the mark of the beast, but a fellow-enthusiast—a surprisingly ignorant one, to be sure, but an enthusiast for all that, and therefore bound to her by unbreakable bonds. Live steam would have been more easily confined than the vast fund of technical knowledge with which she was crammed.

"You should have fed soft food and sour milk," she

began. "Buttermilk would have been all right, and in that way your cows would have been self-supporting. You need a good pasture with a duck-farm. When I was in Germany I saw the most wonderful incubator—a child could operate it. I'd like to show you some brooder-house plans I had drawn over there. You see, you made your first mistake in choosing fresh-water. If I had a good location near *salt*-water—not too near—and proper surroundings, I'd show you something about ducks. I'd start with a thousand—that's plenty—then kill for the market as they quit laying, and mix the stock right, and in three years—"

Bob Wharton signaled frantically to his wife, but there was no stopping the discussion that had begun to rage back and forth. It lasted until the conclusion of the meal, and it was only with an effort that Adorée tore herself away. She was in her element, and in a little time had won the critic's undivided attention; he listened with absorption; he even made occasional notes.

As the two girls dressed hurriedly for the theater, Adorée confessed:

"Golly! I'm glad I stayed. He's not bright; he's perfectly silly about some things, and yet he's the most interesting talker I ever heard. And—*can't* he play a piano?"

CHAPTER XVII

HANNIBAL WHARTON arrived in New York at five o'clock and went directly to Merkle's bank. At eight o'clock Jarvis Hammon died. During the afternoon and evening other financiers, summoned hurriedly from New England shores and Adirondack camps, were busied in preparations for the struggle they expected on the morrow. During the closing hours of the market prices had slumped to an alarming degree; a terrific raid on metal stocks had begun, and conditions were ripe for a panic.

Hammon had bulked large in the steel world, and his position in circles of high finance had become prominent; but alive he could never have worked one-half the havoc caused by his sudden death. That persistent rumor of suicide argued, in the public mind, the existence of serious money troubles, and gave significance to the rumor that for some time past had disturbed the Street. Hammon's enemies summoned their forces for a crushing assault.

In this emergency Bob's father found himself the real head of those vast enterprises in which he had been an associate, and until a late hour that night he was forced to remain in consultation with men who came and went with consternation written upon their faces.

The amazing transformation which followed the birth of the giant Steel Trust had raised many men from well-to-do obscurity into prominence and undreamed-of wealth. Since then the older members of the original

clique had withdrawn one by one from active affairs, and of the younger men only Wharton and Hammon had remained. Equally these two had figured in what was perhaps the most remarkable chapter of American financial history. Both had been vigorous, self-made, practical men. But the outcome had affected them quite differently.

Riches had turned Jarvis Hammon's mind into new channels; they had opened strange pathways and projected him into a life foreign to his early teachings. His duties had kept him in New York, while Wharton's had held him in his old home. Hammon had become a great financier; Wharton had remained the practical operating expert, and, owing to the exactions of his position, he had become linked more closely than ever to business detail. At the same time he had become more and more unapproachable. Unlimited power had forced him into the peculiar isolation of a chief executive; he had grown hard, suspicious, arbitrary. Even to his son he had been for years a remote being.

It was not until the last conference had broken up, not until the last forces had been disposed for the coming battle, that he spoke to Merkle of Bob's marriage. Merkle told him what he knew, and the old man listened silently. Then he drove to the Elegancia.

Bob and Lorelei had just returned from the theater, much, be it said, against the bridegroom's wishes. Bob had been eager to begin the celebration of his marriage in a fitting manner, and it had required the shock of Hammon's death, added to Lorelei's entreaties to dissuade him from a night of hilarity. He was flushed with drink, and in consequence more than a little resentful when she insisted upon spending another night in the modest little home.

"Say! I'm not used to this kind of a place," he argued. "I'm not a cave-dweller. It's a lovely flat—for a murder

—but it's no place to *live*. And, besides, it doesn't look right for me to—come to your house, when all the hotels are gasping for my patronage. I never heard of such a thing. Makes me feel like a rummy."

"Don't be silly," she told him. "We acted on impulse; we can't change everything at a moment's notice. I couldn't bear a hotel just yet."

"But—people take trips when they get married."

"That is different. Are you—in a position to take me away to-night?"

With an eloquent gesture Bob turned his trousers pockets wrong side out. "Not to-night, perhaps, but to-morrow."

"I can't quit the show without two weeks' notice."

"Two weeks?" He was aghast. "Two minutes. Two seconds. I won't have you dodging around stage-doors. To-morrow you'll breeze in and tell my old friend Regan you've quit. Just say, 'I quit'—that's notice enough."

"Bergman won't let me go; it wouldn't be right to ask him."

But Bob was insistent. "It pains me to pull the props out from under the 'profession' and leave the drama flat, but matrimony was a successful institution before the Circuit Theater was built, and a husband has rights. I intend to cure you of the work habit. You must learn to scorn it. Look at me. I'm an example of the unearned increment. We'll kiss this dinky flat a fond farewell—it's impossible, really—I refuse to share such a dark secret with you. To-morrow we leave it for the third and last time. What d'you say to the sunny side of the Ritz until we decide where we want to travel?"

"You don't want to leave New York, you know," she told him, soberly. "You're offering to go because you think it's the proper thing to do and because you don't know what else to suggest. But—I have to work."

"Ah! The family, eh? We'll retire 'em and put an

end to this child labor. Now, as for the trip—we've got to do *something:* we can't just—live. Where do you have your clothes made?"

Lorelei named several tailors of whom Bob had seldom heard.

"That won't do," he said, positively. "I'll get a list of the smartest shops from Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, and I want you to buy enough gowns to last till we reach Paris—a couple dozen will do—then we'll fit out properly. I'll bet you never went shopping—really shopping—did you? and bought everything you saw?"

"Of course not. I never dreamed of such a spree."

"Well, that will be lesson number two. Can you ride?"

"Not well."

"Must know how to ride—that's number three, and very important. I'll get you some horses when we return. We'll spend our mornings at Durland's for a while, and I'll teach you to play polo, too. All the girls are going in for it lately. You'll need an electric motor, I suppose, for calling and shopping—they're making some stunning bodies in that wicker effect. Now, what's your favorite jewel? I haven't had time to get your ring yet—this whole day was upside down. Everything had closed before I opened up, but to-morrow we'll paw through Tiffany's stock, and you can choose what you like. I'm going to select a black-opal set for you—they're the newest thing and the price is scandalous." He paused, eying her curiously, then with a change of tone inquired, "Say, are you in mourning for somebody?"

"Why, no."

"You don't seem to care for all these things I've bought."

Lorelei laughed spontaneously, for the first time during the long day. "Of course I care. But—where is the money coming from? You haven't a dollar."

"My dear, so long as the Western Union lasts you'll

never see a wrinkle on my brow. We'll begin by destroying everything you own—hats, gowns, jewelry—then we'll start at the beginning."

Just then the apartment bell rang. Bob went to the door. He returned with his father at his heels. Mr. Wharton tramped in grimly, nodded at his daughter-in-law, who had risen at the first sound of his voice, then ran his eyes swiftly over the surroundings.

"I hear you've made a fool of yourself again," he began, showing his teeth in a faint smile. "Have you given up your apartment at the Charlevoix?"

"Not yet," said Bob. "We're considering a suite at the Ritz for a few days."

"Indeed. You're going back to the Charlevoix tonight."

Lorelei started. She had expected opposition, but was unprepared for anything so blunt and business-like. "I think you and Bob can talk more freely if I leave you alone," she said.

Hannibal Wharton replied shortly: "No, don't leave. I'll talk freer with you here."

It appeared, however, that Robert stood in no awe of his father's anger; he said lightly:

"They never come back, dad. I'm a regular married man. Lorelei is my royal consort, my yoke-mate, my rib. We'll have to scratch the Charlevoix."

This levity left the caller unmoved; to Lorelei he explained:

"I want no notoriety, so all we need talk about is terms. You'll fare better by dealing directly with me than through lawyers—I'll fight a lawsuit—so let's get down to business. You should realize, however, that these settlements are never as large as they're advertised. I'll pay you ten thousand dollars and stand the costs of the divorce proceedings."

"You are making a mistake," she told him, quietly.

"I expected you to refuse, but ten thousand dollars is better than nothing. Talk it over with your people. Now, Bob, come with me."

"Where?" demanded his son.

"Anywhere. You can't stay here."

"You're infallible in business, dad," Bob protested, "but where sentiment is concerned you're a terrible failure."

"Not at all! Not at all!" Mr. Wharton exclaimed, irritably. "I know real sentiment when I see it, and I'll foot the bill for this counterfeit, but I'm too tired to argue."

Lorelei was standing very white and still; now she said, "Don't you think you'd better go?"

The elder man laid aside his hat and gloves, then spoke with snarling deliberation. "I'll go when I choose. No high and mighty airs with me, if you please." After a curious scrutiny of them both he asked his son: "You don't really imagine that she married you for anything except your money, do you?"

"I flattered myself—" Bob began, stiffly.

"Bah! You're drunk."

"Moderately, perhaps—or let us say that I am in an unnaturally argumentative mood. I take issue with you. You see, dad, I've been crazy about Lorelei ever since I first saw her, and—"

"To be sure, that's quite natural. But why in hell did you *marry* her? That wasn't necessary, was it?"

Lorelei uttered a sharp cry. Bob rose; his eyes were bright and hard. Mr. Wharton merely arched his shaggy brows, inquiring quickly of the bride: "What's the matter? I state the case correctly, do I not?"

"No!" gasped Lorelei.

"Let's talk plainly—"

"That's a bit too plain, even from you, dad," Bob cried, angrily.

"It's time for plain speaking. You got drunk, and she trapped you. I'm here to get you out of the trap. It's a matter of money, isn't it? Well, then, don't let's allow sentiment to creep in." Addressing himself to Lorelei, he said: "You probably counted on five times the sum I offer, but ten thousand dollars will buy a lot of clothes, and the publicity won't hurt you professionally; it 'll do you good. You might even spend the winter in Europe and catch another victim. I believe that's the amount Merkle offered you, isn't it?"

"Merkle? What are you talking about?" Bob demanded.

"Did Mr. Merkle tell you how and why he came to make that offer?" asked Lorelei, indignantly.

"No. But he offered it, did he not?"

"Yes, and I refused it. Ask him why?"

"We don't seem to be getting along very well," Bob interposed. "Lorelie is my wife and your daughter-in-law. What's more, I love her; so I guess that ends the Reno chatter." He crossed to Lorelei's side and encircled her with his arm. "There's no price-tag on this marriage, dad, and you'll regret what you've said."

Wharton senior shrugged wearily. "You tell him, Miss; maybe he'll believe you."

"Tell him what?" asked Lorelei.

"The truth, of course." He paused for a reply, and, receiving none, broke out wrathfully: "Then I will. She's a grafter, Bob, and her whole family are grafters. Now, let me finish. She makes her living in any way she can; she smirks at you out of every catch-penny advertisement along Broadway. She's 'The Chewing-Gum Girl' and 'The Petticoat Girl' and 'The Bath-Tub Girl'—"

"There's nothing dishonest in that."

"Just a minute. I won't have my daughter's face grinning at me every time I get into a street-car. I'd be the laughing-stock of the country. It's legitimate, perhaps, but it's altogether too damned colorful for me."

"Is that all you have against her?"

"Not by any means. She's notorious—"

"Newspaper talk!"

"Is it? She's made her living by bleeding men, by taking gifts and renting herself out the way she did at Hammon's supper. Men don't support show-girls from chivalrous motives. I had her family looked up, and it didn't take two hours. Listen to this report." He extracted a typewritten sheet from his bill-case, adjusted his glasses, and began to read:

"Peter Knight: former residence Vale, New York. Held several minor offices; sheriff for one term; involved in scandal over public works and defeated for re-election. Reputation bad. Detailed record can be had if necessary. Moved to this city 1911; clerk in Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity until injured by taxi-cab while intoxicated. Believed to be crippled.

"James Knight, son. Reputation bad. Generally known as a loafer, suspected of boosting for so-called 'wire-tappers' operating on upper West Side last spring. Believed to have some connection with more than one blackmailing scheme—details available. He figured in recent scandal concerning well-known financier and actress. Of late employed as steerer for Max Melcher's gambling-house, West Forty-sixth Street. Broker living at Charlevoix Apartments reported to have lost large sums through his efforts. No police record as yet.

"Mathilda Knight, wife of Peter—

"D'you want the rest?" Mr. Wharton inquired.

"No!" Lorelei gulped.

"'No police record as *yet*'—'Broker living at the Charlevoix Apartments'—'Injured by a taxi-cab while intoxicated,'" quoted Wharton. "Scandal, blackmail, graft. It's all here, Bob. And I hadn't come to this girl's record. The report was made by one of our own men, and it's incomplete, but I can have it elaborated. What do you say, *Mrs. Wharton?* Is it true?"

Lorelei dropped her head. "Most of it, I dare say."

"Did you try to blackmail Merkle?"

"No."

"Your mother and your brother did."

She was silent.

"They tried to scare him into marrying you, did they not?"

"Hammon said something about that," ejaculated Bob, "but I don't believe—"

Lorelei checked him. "It's quite true."

"Merkle said you had nothing to do with it personally," conscientiously explained Mr. Wharton, "and I'm willing to take his word. But that's neither here nor there." There was a moment of silence during which he folded and replaced the report; then he shook his head, exclaiming, "Second-hand goods, my boy!"

"That's a lie!" Lorelei's voice was like a whip.

Mr. Wharton eyed her grimly. "That's something for Bob to determine—I have only the indications to go on. I don't blame him for losing his wits—you're very good-looking—but the affair must end. You're not a girl I'd care to have in my family—pardon my bluntness."

She met his eyes fairly. At no time had she flinched before him, although inwardly she had cringed and her flesh had quivered at his merciless attack.

"You have told Bob the truth," she began, slowly, "in the worst possible way; you have put me in the most unfavorable light. I dare say I never would have had the courage to tell him myself, although he deserves to know. I've been pretty—commercial—because I had to be, but I never sold myself, and I sha'n't begin now. Bob isn't a child; he's nearly thirty years old—old enough to make up his own mind—and he must make this decision, not I."

Bob opened his lips, but his father forestalled him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have no price. If he's sick of the match we'll end it, and it won't cost you a cent."

Bob looked inscrutable; his father smiled for the first time during the interview.

"That's very decent of you," he said, "but of course I sha'n't put the good faith of your offer to the test. I don't want something for nothing. I'll take care of you nicely."

Thus far Bob had yielded precedence to his father, but he could no longer restrain himself. "Now let me take the chair," he commanded, easily. "My mind is made up. You see, I didn't marry 'Peter Knight, residence Vale,' nor 'James Knight, reputation bad,' nor even 'Mathilda Knight, wife of Peter.' I married this kid, and the books are closed. You say the Knights are a bad lot, and Lorelei's reputation is a trifle discolored: maybe you're right, but mine has some inky blots on it, too, and I guess the cleanest part of it would just about match the darkest that hers can show. I seem to have all the best of the deal."

"Don't be an ass," growled his father.

"I've always been one—I may as well be consistent." Bob felt the slender form at his side begin to tremble, and smiled down into the troubled blue eyes upturned to his. "Maybe we'll both have to do some forgiving and forgetting. I believe that's usual nowadays."

"Oh, I'm not whitewashing you," Hannibal snapped. "She probably knows what you are."

"I do," agreed Lorelei. "He's a—drunkard, and everything that means. But you taught him to drink before he could choose for himself."

Mr. Wharton smiled sneeringly. "Admirable! I begin to see that you're more than a pretty woman. Get his sympathy; it's good business. Now he'll think he must act the man. But that will wear off. And understand this: you can't graft off me. You and your family are due

for a great disappointment. Bob hasn't anything, and he won't have until I die, but I'm good for thirty years yet. I'm not going to disinherit him. I'm merely going to wait until you both get tired. Take my word for it, poverty is the most tiresome thing in the world."

"We can manage," said Lorelei.

"You speak for yourself, but he can't make a living—unless he has something in him that I never discovered. I fear you'll find him rather a heavy burden."

Throughout the interview Mr. Wharton had kept his temper quite perfectly, and his coolness at this moment argued a greater fixity of purpose than might have been inferred from a display of rage. He made a final appeal to his son: "Can't you see that it won't do at all, Bob? I won't stand parasites, unless they're my own. Either have done with the matter and let me pay the charges or—go through to the bitter finish on your own feet. She's supporting three loafers; I dare say she can take care of another, but it isn't quite right to put it upon her—she's sure to weary of it sometime. You'll notice I've said nothing about your mother so far, but—she's with me in this. I'll be in the city for several days, and I'd like to have you return to Pittsburg with me when I go. Mother is expecting you. If you decide to stick it out—" Wharton's face showed more than a trace of feeling, his deep voice lowered a tone—"you may go to hell, with my compliments, and I'll sit on the lid to keep you there."

He rose, took his hat, and stalked out of the apartment without so much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHEW! That was a knockout. But who got licked?" Bob went to the little sideboard and helped himself to a stiff drink.

"Did he mean it?"

"My dear, time wears away mountains, and rivers dry up, and the whole solar system is gradually running down, I believe; but dad isn't governed by any natural laws whatsoever. He's built of reinforced concrete, and time hardens him. He's impervious to rust or decay, and gravity exerts no power over him."

"Then I think you'd better make your choice to-night."

Bob's eyes opened. "I have. Don't you understand? I'm going to stand pat—that is, unless"—he hesitated, his smile was a bit uncertain—"unless you're sick of your bargain. I'm afraid you haven't come out of the deal very well. You thought I was rich—and so did I until a moment ago—but I'm not. I've run through a good deal. I don't blame you for considering me a fine catch or for marrying me. You see, I never expected to find a girl who'd take me for anything except my money, so I'm not offended or disappointed or surprised. A bank-account looms up just as big on Fifth Avenue as it does on Amsterdam, and there aren't any more love matches over there than elsewhere. I'm not blind to my short-comings, either; there are a lot of bad habits waiting to be acquired by a chap with time and money like me. I can't live without booze; I don't know how to earn a living; I'm a corking spendthrift. That's one side.

Balanced against that, I possess — let me see—I possess a fair sense of humor. Not a very even account, is it?"

For once in his life Bob showed unmistakable self-consciousness; this was, so far as Lorelei knew, his maiden effort to be serious. He ran on hurriedly: "What I mean to convey is this: I have no regrets, no questions to ask, no reproaches. I got all I expected, and all I was entitled to when I married you. But it seems that you've been cheated, and—I'm ready to do the square thing. I'll step aside and give you another chance, if you say so."

During this little declaration Lorelei had watched him keenly; she appeared to be seriously weighing his offer.

"I was getting pretty tired of things," he added, "and I s'pose I'd have wound up in the D. T. parlors of some highly exclusive institution or behind a bath-room door with a gas-tube in my teeth. But—I met you, and you went to my head. I wanted you worse than I ever wanted anything—worse even than I ever wanted liquor. And now I have you. I've had you for one day, and that's something. I suppose it's silly to talk about starting over—I don't want to reform if I don't have to; moderation strikes me as an awful cold proposition; but it looks as if reform were indicated if I'm to keep you. I'm just an album of expensive habits, and—we're broke. Maybe I could—do something with myself if you took a hand. It's a good deal to ask of a girl like you, but"—he regarded her timidly, then averted his eyes—"if you cared to try it we *might* make it go for a while. And you might get to care for me a little—if I improve." Again he paused hopefully. "I've been as honest as I know how. Now, won't you be the same?"

Lorelei roused herself, and spoke with quiet decision. "I'll go through to the end, Bob."

Bob started and uttered an inarticulate word or two; in his face was a light of gladness that went to the girl's heart. His name had risen freely to her lips; he felt

as if she had laid her hand in his with a declaration of absolute trust.

"You mean that?"

She nodded.

He took her in his arms and kissed her gently; then, feeling her warm against his breast, he burst the bonds that had restrained him up to this moment and covered her face, her neck, her hair with passionate caresses. For the first time since his delirium of the night before he abandoned himself to the hunger her beauty excited, and she offered him no resistance.

At last she freed herself, and, straightening the disorder of her hair, smiled at him mistily.

"Wait. Please—"

"Beautiful!" His eyes were aflame. "You're my wife. Nothing can change that."

"Nothing except—yourself. Now, you *must* listen to me." She forced him reluctantly into his chair and seated herself opposite. He leaned forward and kissed her once more, then seized her hand and held it. At intervals he crushed his lips into its pink palm. "We must start honestly," she began. "Do you mind if I hurt you?"

"You can't hurt me so long as you don't—leave me. Your eyes have haunted me every night. I've seen the curve of your neck—your lips. No woman was ever so perfect, so maddening."

"Always that. You're not a husband at this moment; you're only a man."

He frowned slightly.

"That's what makes this whole matter so difficult," she went on. "Don't you see?"

He shook his head.

"You don't love me, you're drunk with—something altogether different to love. . . . It's true," she insisted. "You show it. You don't even know the real me."

"Beauty may be only a skin disease," Bob laughed, "but ugliness goes clear to the bone."

"I married you for your money, and you married me because—I seemed physically perfect—because my face and my body roused fires in you. I think we are both pretty rotten at heart, don't you?"

"No. Anyhow, I don't care to think about it. I never won anything by thinking. Kiss me again."

She ignored his demand, with her shadowy smile. "I deliberately traded on my looks; I put myself up for a price, and you paid that price regardless of everything except your desires. We muddled things dreadfully and got our deserts. I didn't love you, I don't love you now any more than you love me; but I think we're coming to respect each other, and that is a beginning. You have longings to be something different and better; so have I. Let's try together. I have it in me to succeed, but I'm not sure about you."

"Thanks for the good cheer."

"You're afraid you can't make a living for us—I *know* you can. I'm merely afraid you won't."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't believe the liquor will let you."

"Nonsense. Any man can cut down."

"'Cutting down' won't do for us, Bob." He thrilled anew at her intimate use of his name. "The chemistry of your body demands the stuff—you couldn't be temperate in anything. You'll have to quit."

"All right. I'll quit. I divorce the demon rum; lovers once, but strangers now. I'll quit gambling, too."

Lorelei laughed. "That won't strain your will-power in the least, for half my salary goes up Amsterdam Avenue, and the rest will about run this flat."

Her listener frowned. "Forget that salary talk," he said, shortly. "D'you think I'd let you—support me? D'you think I'm *that* kind of a nosegay? When I get so

I can't pay the bills I'll walk out. To-morrow you quit work, and we move to the Ritz—they know me there, and—this delightful, home-like grotto of yours gives me the colly-wabbles."

"Who will pay the hotel?" Lorelei smiled.

"Mr. George W. Bridegroom, of course. I'll get the money, never fear. I know everybody, and I've borrowed thousands of dollars when I didn't need it. My rooms at the Charlevoix are full of expensive junk; I'll sell it, and that will help. As soon as we're decently settled I'll look for a salaried job. Then watch my smoke. To quote from the press of a few months hence: 'The meteoric rise of Robert Wharton has startled the financial world, surpassing as it does the sensational success of his father. Young Mr. Wharton was seen yesterday at his Wall Street office and took time from his many duties to modestly assure our representative that his ability was inherited, and merely illustrates anew the maxim that "a chip of the old block will return after many days."' That will please dad. He'll relent when I attribute my success to him."

"You must quit drinking before you begin work," said Lorelei.

"I *have* quit."

With a person of such resilient temperament, one who gamboled through life like a faun, argument was difficult. Bob Wharton was pagan in his joyous inconsequence; his romping spirits could not be damped; he bubbled with the optimism of a Robin Goodfellow. Ahead of him he saw nothing but dancing sunshine, heard nothing but the Pandean pipes. The girl wife watched him curiously.

"I wonder if you can," she mused. "Before we begin our new life we're going to make a bargain, binding on both of us. You'll have to stop drinking. I won't live with a drunkard. I'll work until you've mastered the craving."

"No!" Bob declared, firmly. "I'll take the river before I'll let you—keep me. Why, if I—"

Lorelei rose and laid her hand over his lips, saying quietly:

"I'm planning our happiness, don't you understand? and it's a big stake. You must pocket your pride for a while. Nobody will know. We've made a botch of things so far, and there is only one way for us to win out."

"A man who'd let his wife—"

"A man who *wouldn't* let his wife have her way at first is a brute."

"You shouldn't ask it," he cried, sullenly.

"I don't ask it: I insist upon it. If you refuse we can't go on."

"Surely you don't mean that?" He looked up at her with grave, troubled eyes.

"I do. I'm entirely in earnest. You haven't strength to go out among your friends and restrain yourself. No man as far gone as you could do it."

"I've a simpler way than that," he told her, after a moment's thought. "There are institutions where they straighten fellows up. I'll go to one of those."

"No." She rejected this suggestion positively. "They only relieve; they don't cure. The appetite comes back. This is something you must do yourself, once and for all. You must fight this out in secret; this city is no place for men with appetites they can't control. Do this for me, Bob, and—and I'll let you do anything after that. I'll let you—beat me." Getting no response from him, she added gravely, "It is that or—nothing."

"I can't let you go," Bob said, finally.

"Good! We'll keep this apartment and I'll go on working—"

He hid his face in his hands and groaned. "Gee! I'm a rotter."

"You can sell your belongings at the Charlevoix, and we'll use the money. We'll need everything, for I can't piece out my salary the way I've been doing. There can't be any more supper-parties and gifts—"

"I should hope not," he growled. "I'll murder the first man who speaks to you."

"Then is it a real, binding bargain?"

"It is—if you'll bind it with another kiss," he agreed, with a miserable attempt at cheerfulness. "But I sha'n't look myself in the face."

For the first time she came to him willingly.

"Doesn't it seem nice to be honest with yourself and the world?" she sighed, after a time.

"Yes," he laughed. "I'm sorry to cut the governor adrift, but he'll have to get along without our help."

Despite his jocularity he was deeply moved. As the situation grew clearer to him he saw that this girl was about to change the whole current of his careless life; her unexpected firmness, her gentle, womanly determination at this crisis was very grateful—he desperately longed to retain its support—and yet the arrangement to which she had forced his consent went sorely against his grain. His struggle had not been easy. Her surrender to him was as complete and as unselfish as his own acquiescence seemed unmanly and weak. He rose and paced the little room to relieve his feelings. Days and weeks of almost constant dissipation had affected his mental poise quite as disastrously as the strain of the past twenty-four hours had told upon his physical control, and he was shaking nervously. He paused at the sideboard finally and poured himself a steadying drink.

Lorelei watched his trembling fingers fill the glass before she spoke.

"You mustn't touch that," she said, positively.

"Eh?" He turned, still frowning absent-mindedly. "Oh. this?" He held the glass to the light. "You mean

you want me to begin—*now?* A fellow has to sober up gradually, my dear. I really need a jolt—I'm all unstrung."

"I sealed the bargain."

"But, Lorelei—" He set the glass down with a mirthless laugh. "Of course, I won't, if you insist. I intended to taper off—a chap can't turn teetotaler the way he turns a handspring." He eyed the glass with a sudden intensity of longing. "Let's begin to-morrow. Nobody starts a new life at two A. M. And—it's all poured out."

She answered by taking the glass and flinging its contents from the open window. This done, she gathered the bottles from the sideboard—there were not many—and, opening the folding-doors that masked the kitchenette, she up-ended them over the sink. When the last gurgle had died away she went to her husband and put her arms around his neck.

"You must," she said, gently. "If you'll only let me have my way we'll win. But, Bob, dear, it's going to be a bitter fight."

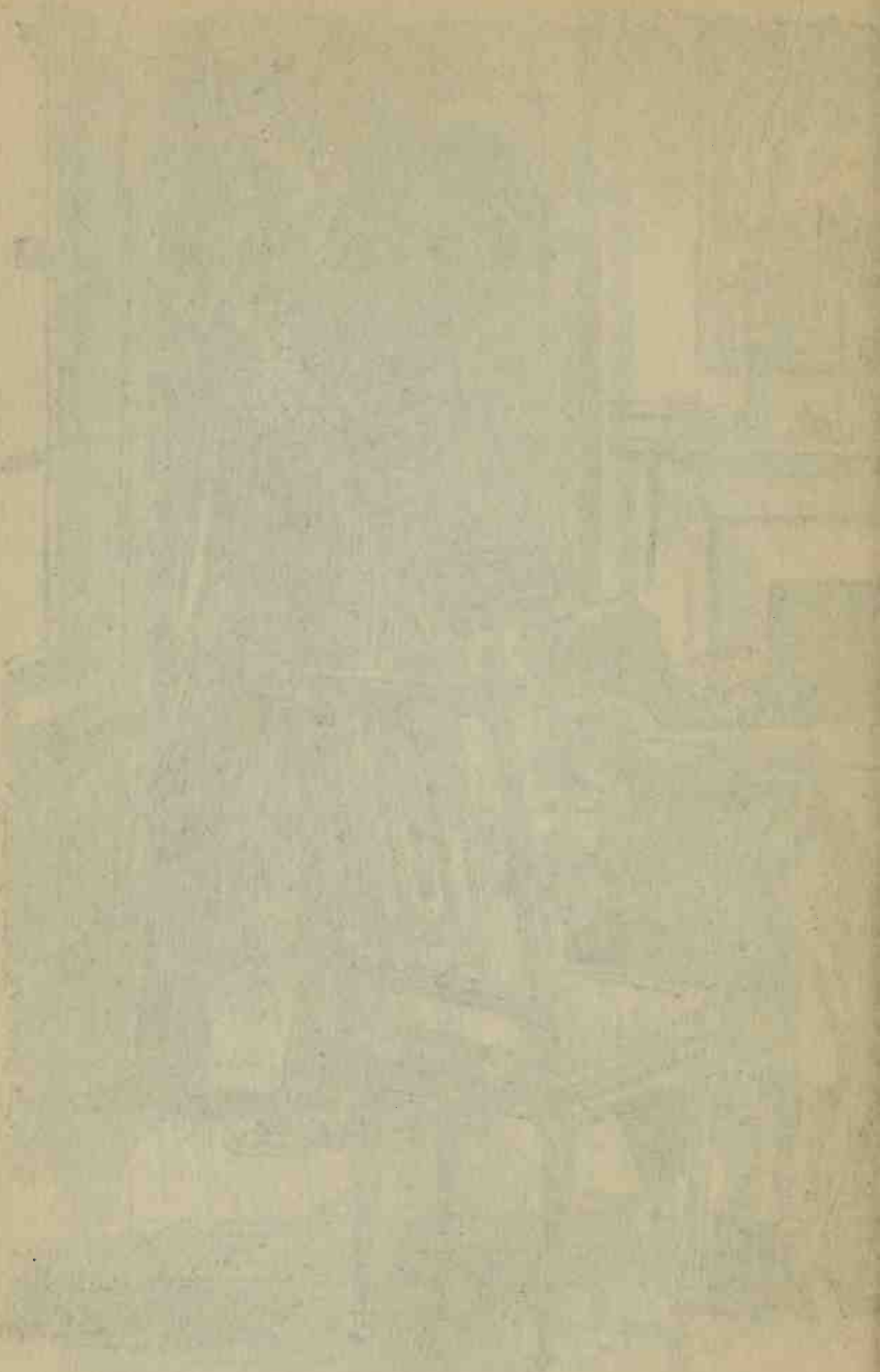
Lorelei's family spent most of the night in discussing their great good fortune. Even Jim, worn out as he was by his part in the events connected with the marriage, sat until a late hour planning his sister's future, and incidentally his own. After he had gone to bed mother and father remained in a glow of exhilaration that made sleep impossible, and it was nearly dawn when they retired to dreams of hopes achieved and ambitions realized.

About nine-thirty on the following morning, just when the rival Wall Street forces were gathering, Hannibal Wharton called up the Knight establishment.

Mrs. Knight was impatient and at first refused to be disturbed, but when the servant at last made it plain that it was Hannibal C. Wharton, not his son Robert,

"YOU mustn't touch that," she said, positively. "Eh! I fellow has to sober up gradually, my dear. I really

Oh, this? You mean you want me to begin—*now?* A need a jolt—I'm all unstrung."



calling, she leaped from her bed with the agility of an acrobat.

"Peter," she cried, "it's Mr. Wharton himself!"

Peter likewise awoke to a tremendous excitement. "He probably wants to get acquainted," exclaimed the invalid. "Tell him to come right up. I can see him any time."

His wife was nervously pinning up her straggling hair, as if she feared the millions of the steel baron gave him the occult power to direct his vision along the wire.

"What shall I say to him?" she gasped. "I suppose I'll have to call on him and Mrs. Wharton, but I haven't a thing to wear."

"For God's sake, don't mention money," implored Peter. "Try to be pleasant for once in your life. Better let me talk to him."

But at this suggestion Mrs. Knight flared up angrily. "You stay where you are!" she snapped. "I know how to handle rich people."

"Mathilda," he shouted, as she hurried from the room, her slippers slapping loosely, a discolored wrapper clutched over her bony chest, "when he talks about Lorelei, cry for him. She's our only daughter and our only support, see? We can't bear to let her go. If you'd only help me to the 'phone—"

The retort that came back was shrewish, but the next instant Mathilda's voice became as honey.

"How *do* you do, Mr. Wharton?" she was bubbling. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting, but I couldn't imagine . . . Yes, this is Lorelei's mother. I'm all upset over the marriage, and of course you are, too; but young people do the strangest things nowadays, don't they? We forgave them, of *course*—one *couldn't* be angry with Robert, he's such a . . . What?"

Peter Knight let himself back into his bed with a feeble curse. Women were such hysterical fools. What man

could swallow that sickly society tone? Then he lifted himself again, round-eyed with apprehension. In that attitude he remained frozen.

"Why, Mr. Wharton!" came echoing through the door. "How *can* you say such a thing? . . . We knew nothing about it. . . . We did not. . . . She's a good girl. . . . I'll have you understand you're talking to her mother. . . . He is not; Jim is a . . . Oh! . . . You talk like an old fool. . . . I . . . You . . ."

The sickly society tone was no longer in evidence. Mathilda's voice was shrill and furious; it rose higher with every second. Peter shouted; he struggled with the bed-clothes. Meanwhile his wife appeared to be having a fit. Had a grounded wire poured an electric shock into her body she could not have clung to the instrument with more desperate tenacity. She writhed; her broken cries were plainly wrung from her by nothing less than agony.

At last there came a cessation of her incoherence and a tinkling of the bell as she furiously vibrated the hook.

"Hello! . . . Hello! . . . Central. . . . My party rang off. . . . Hello!"

The door of Jim's room burst open.

"What the devil?" he cried.

"Mathilda! Mathilda!" wailed Peter.

Mrs. Knight rushed into her husband's presence like a destroying angel. Jim followed in his pajamas. She was more disheveled than ever, her eyes were rolling, her cheeks were livid, her hair seemed to bristle from its fastenings. She was panting in a labored effort to relieve her feelings.

"What's the matter, ma?"

"Matter? Hell! That was Hannibal Wharton!" stormed the invalid.

"It's—all over," shrilled Mrs. Knight. "He won't have it. He's cut them off. He called me a—a—"

Once more she choked in her rage; her teeth chattered. "*Bob's broke!*"

"Wait a minute," Jim cried, roughly. "Let's hear all about it before you bite somebody. Is Wharton sore?"

"He's crazy. He said we trapped Bob. He called us grafters and thieves and blackmailing parasites—"

"Rats! Bob's got money of his own."

"Not a cent. He's in debt. And the old man won't give him a dollar until he's divorced."

"I don't believe it," protested Jim.

Peter mocked at them, his bloated, pasty face convulsed with anger. "Fine job you made of it, you two. So *this* is your grand match. *This* is how you put us on Easy Street, eh? You married the girl to a bum. Why didn't you look him up?"

"Why didn't *you?*" screamed his wife. "*You* didn't say anything. Everybody thinks he's rich—"

"He is, too," Jim asserted. "He must be. Old Wharton is bluffing, but— We'll find out. Get into your dress, ma. We'll see Bob. I've got an ace buried, and if that dirty loafer sold us out I'll put him over the jumps. He can't double-cross *me*, understand; I've got the goods on him, and on all of 'em."

"Oh, we've been double-crossed, all right," sneered Peter. "Lorelei's down and out now. She's no good any more. I guess you'll listen to me next time."

His son turned upon him furiously, crying:

"Shut up! Or I'll—" He left his threat unfinished and rushed back to his room, muttering under his breath. As he flung himself into his clothes he could hear the quarrel still raging between the other two, and he lifted his clenched hands above his head with an oath.

"Fuss, fight, and fury," he wailed. "Fine place for a nervous guy! If I don't end in a mad-house I'll be lucky."

CHAPTER XIX

ON the way to the Elegancia Mrs. Knight recounted in greater detail and with numerous digressions and comments what Hannibal Wharton had said to her. Not only had he given full vent to his anger at the marriage, but he had allowed himself the pleasure of expressing a frank opinion of the entire Knight family in all its unmitigated and complete badness. Mrs. Knight herself he had called a blood-sucker, it seemed—the good woman shook with rage at the memory—and he had threatened her with the direst retribution if she persisted in attempting to fasten herself upon him. Bob, he had explained, was a loafer whom he had supported out of a sense of duty; if the idiot was ungrateful he would simply have to suffer the consequences. But Bob's mother felt the disgrace keenly, and on her account Hannibal had expressed himself as willing to ransom the young fool for, say, ten thousand dollars.

"Disgrace, eh? Ten thousand dollars?" Jim growled. "What does he think we are, anyhow? Why, that ain't cigarette money."

"I never was so insulted in my life," stormed Mrs. Knight. "You should have *heard* him!"

With a show of confidence not entirely real Jim rejoined: "Now, ma, don't heat up. Everybody forgets me, but I'm going to draw cards in this game."

The interview that followed their arrival at Lorelei's home was far from pleasant, for Mrs. Knight was still too indignant to leave the discussion in Jim's more capable

hands; and Lorelei, wishing Bob to cherish no illusions, allowed her relatives to make a complete and distressing exhibition of their greed. At his first opportunity Bob explained rather briefly:

"I offered Lorelei her freedom last night when my income was amputated."

"You've had time to think it over," his wife interposed. "Do you still want me?"

"Why, of course. And you?"

She shrugged. "I don't change in one night. Now—I wish you and Jim would leave mother and me—"

Bob acquiesced, glad to escape even in company with his redoutable brother-in-law. When he and Jim had gone Mrs. Knight addressed Lorelei with motherly candor.

"He's a pleasant fellow, of course, and he's crazy about you; but don't let's be sentimental. If there's no chance to make it up with his family we must get out of this mess and save what we can."

"Was Mr. Wharton very angry?"

"*Was* he?" Mrs. Knight rolled her eyes in mingled rage and despair. "I'm positively sick over the things he said. Everybody seems to be against us, and—I'm almost ready to give up. But at least you saved your good name—it was a marriage, not a scandal. We have that to be thankful for." She followed this outburst of optimism with another. "You can keep the name and go into vaudeville. The publicity will help you, and that old crank will surely stretch his offer to keep his name off the bill-boards. Of course, we won't get anything like what we expected, but we'll get something. Fifteen or twenty thousand is better than—" Noting the shadow of a smile upon her daughter's lips, she checked her rush of words. "You don't seem to care what—"

"I don't."

Mrs. Knight's face twisted into an expression of pained

incredulity. "Surely you don't mean to live with Bob?" she gasped. "Not—*now.*"

"I do mean to."

The mother's lips parted, closed, parted again—she seemed to taste something unspeakably bitter. She groped for words to fit her state of mind, but words failed her. When she did speak, however, the weakness of her vocabulary was offset by the shrill tone of her surprise. "My *dear!* Why, my *dear!* He hasn't a *cent.* Of course you're quite confused now—you've been through a lot, and you think he's the only man in the world—but it's impossible. It's absurd. The marriage was only a form. You're no more his wife in the sight of God than—"

"Let's not talk about God," cried Lorelei. "That ceremony was scarcely legal, not to speak of religion or decency."

"You've lost your mind. You've changed completely."

"Yes, I have. You see, I wasn't a wife until yesterday—until Bob and I had an understanding; but I *am* a wife now, and I suppose I'll never be a girl again. I've begun to think for myself, mother; I've begun to understand. I've had a suspicion that my old ideas were wrong, and they were."

"Fiddle-de-dee! You're hysterical. You can't make me believe you learned to love that man."

"I don't say I love him."

Mrs. Knight snorted her triumph loudly. "Then you mustn't live with him another moment. My dear child, such a relationship is—well, think it out for yourself."

Lorelei saw the futility of argument, but certain thoughts demanded expression, and she voiced them, as much for her own sake as for her mother's. "It's too late to talk about that kind of honor. But there's another kind. When I married Bob I sold myself; and all of us—I mean the family—knew that what I sold was

counterfeit. He thought he was getting something more than my body, but we knew he wasn't, and now that we find we took bad money for a worthless article, how can we pretend to be swindled? When people try to cheat, and get cheated themselves, what do they do? If they're game they smile and take their medicine, don't they?"

It was plain that this form of logic impressed the listener not at all. Lorelei continued:

"I've learned that marriage is more than I considered it, mother. It's an obligation. I intend to live up to my part just as long as Bob lives up to his. If he complained of the fraud we practised on him I'd be willing to leave him; but he doesn't—so the matter is out of our hands."

Mrs. Knight relieved her steadily increasing anger by a harsh outburst.

"I never thought you could be so silly, after the way you were raised. You talk about obligations; what about your obligation to your parents? Didn't we give up everything for you? Didn't Peter sacrifice his life's work to give you an opportunity?"

"I'll keep on sharing my salary with you."

"Salary!" Mrs. Knight spat out the word. "After all our plans! Salary! My God!"

"You're probably just as honest in your ideas as I am in mine," Lorelei told her. "I sha'n't allow you to want for—"

"I should hope not, since you're to blame for Peter's condition— Oh, you know you are! If you hadn't wanted a career he'd still be in Vale, a strong, healthy man instead of a cripple."

"I didn't want a career," Lorelei denied with heat. "And father almost *had* to leave Vale."

"Nothing of the sort. He was a big man there. 'Had to leave Vale,' eh? So you've turned against your own blood, and disparage your father— Anyhow, he was

hurt while he was working to give you a start, and now he's helpless. Who waits on him? I do. If I believed in prayers I'd pray that you may never have a child to disappoint you as you've disappointed him and me." Her voice quavered as she tried for pathos, but her fury was still too fresh to be entirely restrained, and it scalded her like vitriol. "If Bob Wharton was half a man he'd step aside; but of course he won't until he's had enough of your beauty. That's all he wants, your beauty—and you'll be fool enough to let him have it *for nothing*. I'm sure I wish you joy with the selfish wretch and with your new-fangled ideas of wifely devotion. This will kill Peter. You'll have his death on your conscience. Think that over, now that you're so fond of thinking. Ten thousand dollars right now would save his life. Think that over, too, when your own father is dead and gone."

White with anger, sick with disappointment, Mrs. Knight whisked herself out of the apartment.

Bob returned in excellent spirits—nothing had power permanently to dampen his cheerfulness—and, seizing Lorelei's hand, he slipped a diamond ring upon her third finger, then a plain gold band over that.

"Now we're legally wrapped up in the same package and labeled 'Wed,'" he declared. "I've been terribly embarrassed."

"How did you manage to buy these?" Lorelei inquired, with some curiosity.

"I earned the money. Fact! It was a premium on abstinence. I met a friend; he invited me to drink; I refused; friend was stunned. Before he recovered I ran through his pockets like a pet squirrel. It beats a mask and a lead pipe."

"We can't begin this way," she laughed. "I love pretty things, and this is your first gift"—she kissed the soli-

taire—"but please don't give me anything more for a while. I'm not going to lecture you nor wear a long face nor find fault—ever—we're going to wear smiles while our experiment lasts. To-morrow is Sunday—will you take me somewhere?"

"Will I?" Bob cried, in delight. "I'll hire a car and we'll motor up to Tuxedo. There's a dandy crowd out there. We'll take Adorée and the Immaculate Critic, and we'll have dinner at the club. Campbell can show the latest effects in negligées, and—"

"That's too expensive; let's all go to Coney Island."

"Coney? How do you get there?"

"I don't know. Will you go?"

"Certainly, if you want to! I dare say we'll meet some of the best steamfitters in the city. We'll patronize everything from the Mystic Maze to the Trained Fleas; we'll Bump the Bumps and you'll throw your arms around me and scream, and we'll look at the Incubator Babies and blush. I can't wait."

Strangely enough, the news of Bob Wharton's marriage had not leaked into the papers up to this time, and Lorelei, having regard for the feelings of his parents, insisted that he help her to keep the matter secret as long as possible. Bob rebelled at first, for he adored publicity. He rejoiced in his newest exploit and desired his world to hear of it, while the prospect of further mortifying his father was so agreeable that it required much persuasion to make him relinquish it. With her own family Lorelei had less difficulty, for they were by no means eager to advertise their bad bargain and had withdrawn behind a stiff restraint, leaving the couple to their own devices. This attitude spared the bride much unpleasant notoriety, enabling her to pursue her work at the theater without comment.

Bob's society proved in some ways a welcome change from the sordid drabness of her own relatives, for he was

colorful, versatile, and nearly always good-humored. He kept Lorelei entertained, at least, and if at times he provoked her it was only as a mischievous boy tries the patience of a parent. He was weirdly prankish; serious happenings reacted strangely upon him. Misfortune aroused in him a wild hilarity; cares excited mirth. He bore his responsibilities lightly and displayed them to his friends with the same profound pride with which a small boy exhibits a collection of beetles, but they meant nothing more.

Lorelei realized before long that this very jocundity of his, since it fed upon constant change and excitement, constituted the gravest menace to their happiness. The man lived entirely outside of himself; he utterly lacked the power of self-amusement, and, although he seemed content when she was near, during the long hours of her absence he was like a fretful child. He refused to frequent the theater, ostensibly because of their secret, in reality because of his shame at allowing her to work. As Lorelei came to know him better and to understand the conflicting forces within him, she began to wonder how long he could hold himself true to his bargain.

During the first week of their married life his system struggled to throw off the effects of his recent dissipations, and in consequence it craved only rest. Greatly encouraged by this lack of desire, he boasted that the battle was already won, and Lorelei pretended to agree with him.

She did not deceive herself, however, and a brief experience convinced her that to be merely a wife to one of Bob's vagrant disposition was not enough; that in order to keep his new self alive she must also be his sweetheart, his chum, and his partner. If she failed in any one of these rôles disaster was bound to follow. But to succeed in them all, when there was no love to strengthen her, was by no means easy. Always she felt a great emptiness, and a disappointment that her life had been so crookedly

fashioned: sometimes she even felt degraded, and wondered if she were doing right, after all. Reason argued that to live with a man she did not love was immoral, and the mere fact that she and Bob were legally married gave her no comfort whatever. There had been nothing sacred in their union; she supposed that the courts would dissolve it if the truth became known.

More than once Lorelei had spurned offers far more profitable and no less holy than that existing between her and Bob, and it seemed to her now that the difference between mistress and wife must lie in something besides the mutterings of a sleepy Hoboken court officer. Just where the line of demarcation lay, however, or upon which side of that line she stood, she could not determine.

In the course of a fortnight Bob began to grow restless. One evening when he came for her she saw that he was nervous; a strained, tired look had crept into his eyes, and she thought she understood. Nevertheless his spirits were ebullient. When they reached home he ushered her into the apartment with a flourish, and Lorelei was amazed to find their table set with strange linen, silver, and china and the dining-room decorated as if for a party.

"Who's coming? What on earth?" she exclaimed.

"A little surprise. A supper for just you and me, my dear."

Two strangers, evidently caterer's men, were completing the final preparations for an extravagant banquet. Noting a collection of wine-glasses at each place, Lorelei glanced at Bob reproachfully, but he only laughed, saying:

"Take heart. The liquid diet is all a bluff. Kindly note the centerpiece."

She saw that the center of the table was occupied by a highly decorated silver wine-cooler—empty.

"There it sits," Bob exclaimed, "the little Temple of Bacchus—overgrown with roses. It used to be my shrine and my confessional until I saw the light. Now

that I've escaped from the bondage of sin, sickness, and error, I'm giving a triumphal feast upon the altar steps."

It was one of his whims. During the meal he made elaborate speeches in the names of his friends. His imaginary guests congratulated him; in empty glasses they toasted the bride, they extolled her beauty, they praised his own gallantry, and vaunted his conquest of the demon rum. As the supper progressed Bob simulated a growing intoxication, while the hired servants looked on as if at the antics of a lunatic. He made it amusing, and Lorelei entered into the spirit of the make-believe. But when they were alone and all traces of the feast had disappeared he swooped down out of the clouds and confessed miserably:

"I thought I could kid myself, but I can't. I want a drink. *I—want—a—drink!* God! how I want it!"

Lorelei went swiftly to him. "The fight is just beginning, Bob. You're doing nobly."

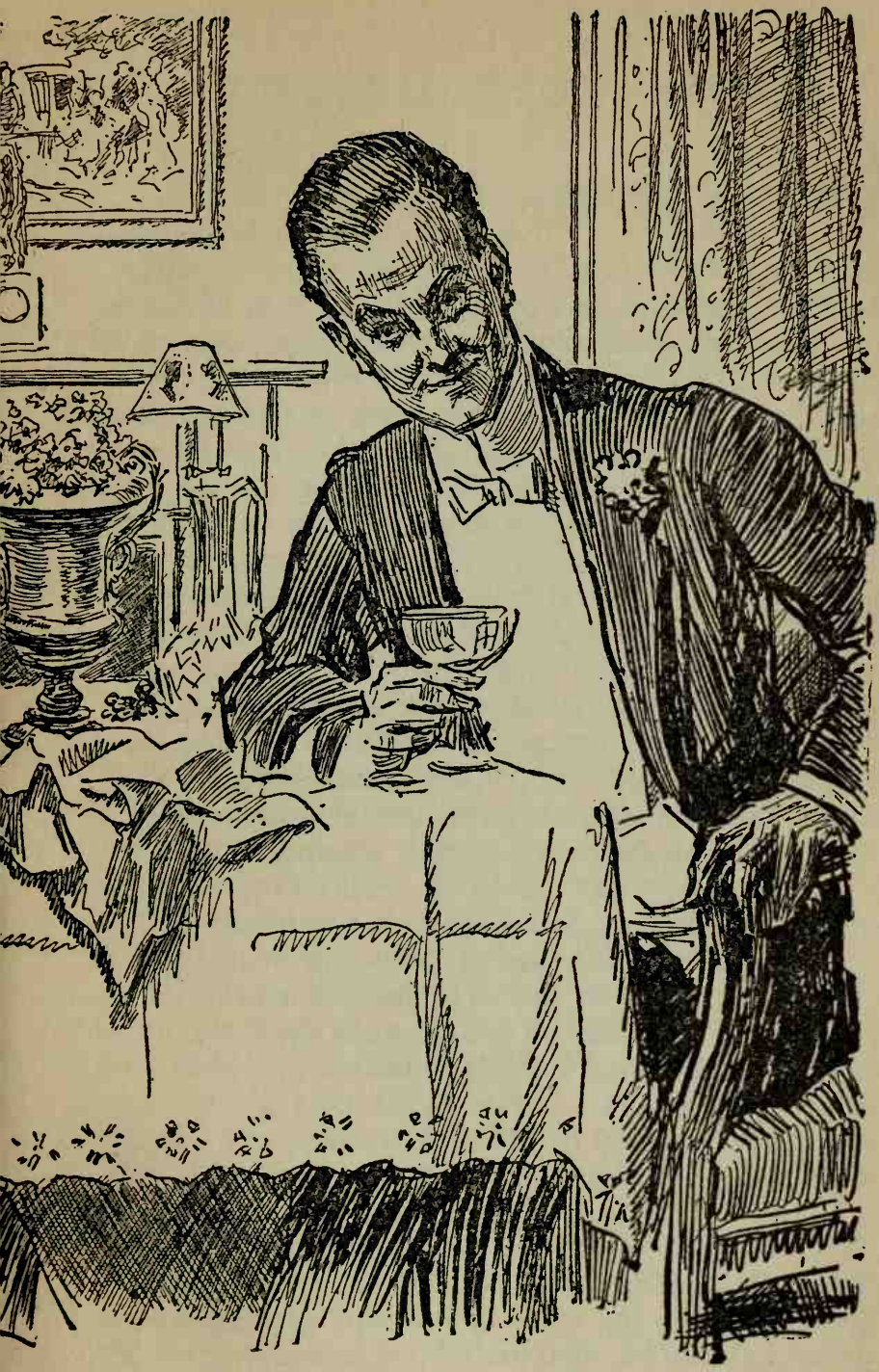
"It isn't thirst," he explained, and she saw that same strained uneasiness in his bright eyes. "I'm not *thirsty*—I'm shaky inside. My ego is wabbling on its pins and I'm rattling to pieces. I manage well enough when you're around, but when I'm alone I—remember." She felt him twitch and shiver nervously. "And there are so many places to get booze! Everywhere I look I see a bartender with arms outstretched. When I grit my teeth the damned appetite leaves me alone, but when I'm off my guard it gumshoes in again. I get tired of fighting."

Lorelei nodded sympathetically. "That's why it's so hard to reform; one's conscience tires, but temptation is always fresh."

"It's not thirst," Bob repeated. "My soul is dried out. I get to thinking late at night. I'm afraid I'm going to quit."

"You must keep busy."

DURING the meal he made elaborate speeches in the names extolled her beauty, and vaunted his conquest of the



his friends. In empty glasses they toasted the bride, they
non rum.

"I'm going to work."

"No, no! Not yet," she cried, quickly. "You must fight it out where I can help."

Bob smiled gratefully. "You're a thoroughbred. I promised to let you have your way, and you shall. Even if we lose the patient it will be a dandy operation."

Beginning with the next morning Lorelei inaugurated a change in the domestic routine. Every day thereafter she and Bob took a long walk. He rebelled, of course, as soon as the novelty wore off, for he detested walking. So did she, for that matter, but she pretended to like it, and her simulated zest overcame his reluctance. They did not amble aimlessly about the streets; she led him on purposeful tramps that kept them in the open air most of the day, and, although her feet blistered until she could hardly drag herself to the theater when night came, she persisted. In time the walking grew to be a dreadful task; it took all her determination, but she would not give up.

With admirable craft she gradually won him away from the cafés, assuming delight in household duties that she was far from feeling. In reality she was a wretched cook, but she declared her intention of becoming an expert and insisted upon preparing at least two of their daily meals, at which time she saw to it that Bob ate more sweets and more salt foods than he was accustomed to. The former took the place of alcohol, the latter roused a healthy thirst, and thirsty men drink water. These were only little things; her heaviest task lay in keeping his mind occupied. At times this was easy; again the effort wore her out. Bob began to have surly spells.

For the first time in her life Lorelei really worked, and worked not for herself, but for another. Although the experience was interesting in its novelty, the result remained unsatisfactory, for not only did love fail to respond to these sacrifices, but she could see no improvement in Bob's condition. The thing she fought was impalpable,

yet enormous; it was weak, yet strong; it seemed to sleep, yet it was ever awake.

Of necessity the two lived in the closest intimacy, than which nothing is ordinarily more fatal to domestic happiness. But Bob was unique; he did not tire; he began to rely upon Lorelei as a sick man leans upon his nurse, and to worship her as a man worships his sweetheart. There was more than passion in his endearments now.

But it was discouraging to the girl, who gained no strength from her penance and derived no satisfaction whatever in service for service's sake. The whole arrangement tried her patience desperately; she was weary in mind and body, and looked back with regret upon her former easy life. There was no time now for recreation —Bob had to be amused. Salary-day assumed a new importance, and she began to count the cost of every purchase.

So spring went and midsummer came. It was terribly hot in the city; the nights were breathless, the days were glaring, and this heat was especially trying to one in Bob's condition. In his periods of gaiety he showered his wife with attentions and squandered every dollar he could borrow in presents for her; in his hours of depression he was everything strange, morose, and irritable.

Without her knowledge he applied to his old firm for a salaried position and was refused. He appealed to Merkle with the same result, but succeeded in borrowing a thousand dollars, with which he bought Lorelei a set of black opals, going into debt for half the price.

CHAPTER XX

LORELEI'S family continued to smart under a sense of bitter injustice, but although they kept aloof they were by no means uninterested in her experiment. On the contrary, they watched it with derisive enjoyment, predicting certain failure. After Hannibal Wharton's insult Jim was all for a prompt revenge, but he could not determine just how to use his dangerous knowledge to the best advantage. He considered the advisability of enlisting the aid of Max Melcher; but, not liking the thought of dividing the loot, he decided provisionally to engineer a separation between Bob and Lorelei.

His desire to make mischief arose in only a slight degree from resentment—Jim's method of making a living had long since dulled the edge of feeling—it was merely the first step in a comprehensive scheme. With Bob and Lorelei estranged, a divorce would follow, and divorces were profitable. A divorce, moreover, would open the way for a second inroad upon the Wharton wealth, for with Lorelei's skirts clear Jim could proceed with a larger scheme of extortion, based on the Hammon murder.

One evening after Lorelei had gone to the theater Jim appeared at the apartment and found Bob in a mood so restless and irritable that he dared not go out.

"I had a hunch you were lonesome," the caller began, "so I came up to whittle and spit at the stove."

Now Jim could be agreeable when he chose; his parasitic life had developed in him a certain worldly good-fellowship; he was frankly unregenerate, and he had

sufficient tact never to apologize nor to explain. Therefore he kept Bob entertained.

A few nights later he returned with a fund of new stories, and during the evening he confessed to a consuming thirst.

"Death Valley has nothing on this place," he mourned.

Bob explained apologetically, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing in the house wetter than Croton water."

"I understand! Will you object if I sweeten a glass of it with some Scottish rites? I'm afraid of germs, and if water rots leather think what it must do to the sensitive lining of a human stomach?" Jim drew a flask from his pocket, then hesitated as if in doubt.

"Don't mind me," Bob assured him, hastily. "I'm strapped in the driver's seat." But he looked on with eager appreciation as his brother-in-law filled a long glass and sipped it.

Bob had never been a whisky-drinker, yet the faint odor of the liquor tantalized him. When in the course of time he saw Jim preparing a second drink he stirred.

"Kind of itchy, eh? Let's whip across the street and have a game of pool," suggested Jim; and Bob was glad to escape from the room.

An agreeable hour followed; but Bob played badly, and found that his eye had lost its sureness. His hand was uncertain, too, and this lack of co-ordination disgusted him. He was sure that with a steadying drink he could beat Jim, and eventually he proved it; but, mindful of his resolution, he compromised on beer, which, Jim agreed, could not reasonably be called an intoxicant.

On his way to the theater Bob chewed cinnamon bark, and when he kissed Lorelei he held his breath.

This was the first of several pool matches, and after a while Bob was gratified to find that beer in moderation left no disagreeable effect whatever upon him. He rejoiced in his power of restraint.

There came a night when he failed to meet his wife. After waiting nearly half an hour Lorelei went home, only to find the apartment deserted. She nibbled at a lonely lunch, trying to assure herself that nothing was seriously amiss; but she could not make up her mind to go to bed. She tried to read, and failed. An hour passed, then another; a thousand apprehensions crowded in upon her, and she finally found herself walking the floor, but pulled herself together with a mirthless laugh. So it had come, she reflected, with mingled bitterness and relief; her fight was over, her part of the bargain was ended, she was free to live her own life as she chose. Certainly she had done her best, and above all question she was not the sort of wife who could wait patiently, night after night, for a drunken husband.

Bob, when he did arrive, entered with elaborate caution. He paused in the little hall, then tossed his hat into the living-room, where his wife was waiting. After a moment his head came slowly into view, and he said:

"When the hat stays in, go in; when it comes out, beat it."

Lorelei saw that he was quite drunk.

"I just came from the theater," he explained, "but it was dark. Has the show failed, dearie?" He tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away. "Come! Must have my little kiss," he insisted; then as she rose and moved away, leaving him swaying in his tracks, he began gravely to unroll an odd, thin package that resembled a tennis-racket. Removing a soiled white wrapping, then an inner layer of oiled paper, he exposed the sad remains of what had been an elaborate bouquet of double English violets fringed with gardenias. He stared at the flowers in some bewilderment.

"Must have sat on 'em," he opined at last; then he cried brightly: "Ha! Pressed flowers! I'm full of old-fashioned sentiment." After studying Lorelei's unsmiling face his

tone altered. "Oh, I know! I slipped, but it couldn't be helped. Nature insisted, and I yielded gracefully; but no harm done, none whatever. This isn't a defeat, my dear; it's a victory. I licked the demon rum and proved myself a man of iron. I subjugated the cohorts of General Benjamin Booze, then I signed a treaty of peace, and there was no bad blood on either side." After an uncomfortable pause, during which he vainly waited for her to speak, he explained more fully: "My dear, nothing is absolute! Life is a series of compromises. Have a heart. Would you rob the distiller of his livelihood? Think of the struggling young brewer with a family. Could you take the bread from the mouths of his little ones? The president of a bottling-works may be a Christian; he may have a sick wife. Remember the boys that work in the hop-fields and the joyous peasant girls of France. Moderation is the thing. Live and let live."

Lorelei nodded. "Exactly! We shall live as we choose, only, of course, we can't live together after this." Then her disgust burst its control, and she demanded, bitterly, "Haven't you any strength whatever? Haven't you any balance, Bob?"

He grinned at her cheerfully. "I should say I had. I walked a fence on the way home just to prove it; and I scarcely wabbled. Balance! Strength! Why, you ought to see Jim. They had to *carry* him."

"Jim? Was—Jim with you?"

"In spirit, yes; in body—only for a time. For a brief while we went gaily, hand in hand, then Jim lagged. He's a nice boy, but weak; he falters beneath a load; and, as for pool, why, I've slept on pool-tables, so naturally I know the angles better than he. Ha! that's a funny line, isn't it? I know the angles of pool-tables because I've slept on 'em, see? Don't hurry; I'll wait for you. Even an 'act' like mine needs applause."

But Lorelei was in no laughing mood. She questioned

Bob searchingly and soon learned of Jim's visits, of the flask, of the pool games. When she understood it all her eyes were glowing, but she found nothing to say. At last she got Bob to bed, then lay down beside him and stared into the darkness through many wakeful hours.

In the morning he was not only contrite, but badly frightened, yet when he undertook to make his peace he found her unexpectedly mild.

"If you're sorry, that's all I ask," she said. "I changed my mind during the night."

"Never again!" he promised, feelingly. "I thought I had cured myself."

Lorelei smiled at him faintly. "Cured! How long have you been a drinker?"

"Oh, nearly always."

"When were you first drunk?"

"I was eighteen, I think."

"You've been undergoing a bodily change for ten years. During all that time your brain-cells have been changing their structure, and they'll never be healthy or normal until they've been made over. You can't accomplish that in a few weeks."

"Say, you don't mean I'm going to stay thirsty until my egg-shaped dome becomes round again?"

"Well, yes."

"Why, that might take years!"

"It took ten years to work the damage—it will probably take ten years to repair it."

Bob was aghast. "Good heavens! In ten years I'll be too old to drink—I'd tremble so that I'd spill it. But where did you get all this M. D. dope?"

"I've been reading. I've been talking to a doctor, too. You see, I wanted to help."

"Let's change doctors. Ten years! It can't be done."

"I'm afraid you're right. There's no such thing as reformation. A born criminal never reforms; only those

who go wrong from weakness or from bad influences ever make good."

"Drinking isn't a crime," Bob declared, angrily, "any more than freckles. It's just a form of diversion."

Lorelei shook her head. "If you're a born alcoholic you'll probably die a drunkard. I'm hoping that you didn't inherit the taste."

"Well, whether it was left to me or whether I bought it, I can't go dry for ten years."

"Then our bargain is ended."

He looked up sharply. "Oh no, it isn't!"

"Yes."

He extended a shaking hand, and his voice was supplicating as he said: "I can't get along without you, kid. You're a part of me—the vital part. I'd go to pieces quick if you quit now."

"When we made our agreement I meant to live up to every bit of it," Lorelei told him, gently, "but we're going to try again, for this was Jim's fault."

"Jim? Jim was sorry for me. He tried to cheer—"

Lorelei's smile was bitter. "Jim was never sorry for anybody except himself. My family hate you just as your family hate me, and they'd like to separate us."

"Say, that's pretty rotten!" Bob exclaimed. "If he weren't your brother I'd—"

Lorelei laughed mirthlessly. "Go ahead! I wish you would. It might clear the atmosphere."

"Then I will." After a moment he continued, "I suppose you feel you must go on supporting them?"

"Of course."

"Just as you feel you must support me. Is it entirely duty in my case?" Seeing her hesitate, he insisted, "Isn't there any love at all?"

"I'm afraid not, Bob."

The man pondered silently. "I suppose if I were the right sort," he said, at length, with some difficulty, "I'd

let you go under these circumstances. Well, I'm not the right sort; I'm not big or noble. I'm just an ordinary, medium-sized man, and I'm going to keep you. However, I'm through side-stepping; I've tried to outrun the Barleycorn Brothers, but it's no use, so I'm going to turn and face them. If they lick me I'll go under. But if I go under I'll take you with me. I won't give you up. I won't!"

"I sha'n't let you pull me down," she told him, soberly.

"Then you'll have to bear me up. When a man's drowning he grabs and holds on. That's me! There's nothing fine about me, understand? I'm human and selfish. I'd be happy in hell with you."

"You're not fair."

"I don't pretend to be. This isn't a bridge game; this is life. I'll cheat, I'll hold out, I'll deal from the bottom, if I can't win in any other way. Good God! Don't you understand that you're the only thing I ever loved, the only thing I ever wanted and couldn't get? I've never had but half of you; don't expect me to give that up." He rose, jammed his hat upon his head as if to escape from the room, then turned and crushed his wife to him with a fierce cruelty of possession. Lorelei could feel him shaking as he covered her face with kisses, but nothing within her stirred even faintly in answer to his passion.

When Bob reached the financial district that day and resumed his quest for work he was ablaze with resentment at himself and at the world in general.

He took up the search with a dogged determination that was quite unlike him. One after another he canvassed his friends for a position, and finally, as if ill fortune could not withstand his fervor, he was successful. It was not much of a job that was offered him, but he snapped at it, and returned home that evening in the best of humor.

Already the serious issues of the morning were but a memory; he burst in upon Lorelei like a gale, shouting:

"I'm chalk-boy at Crosset & Meyers, so you can give Bergman your notice to-night."

"What's the salary?"

"It isn't a salary; it's a humiliation—twenty-five a week is the total insult."

"Why, Bob! That won't keep two and the family—"

"Damn the family!" He quieted himself with an effort. "Well, you give your notice, anyhow. I'll spear the coin for both establishments somehow. Come! I insist. I want to be able to shave myself without blushing."

Lorelei's objections were not easily overcome, but at last, in view of the fact that the summer run of the Revue was drawing to a close and the show would soon take to the road, she allowed herself to be persuaded.

Throughout the next week Bob Wharton really tried to make good. He was enthusiastic; the excitement of actual accomplishment was so novel that he had not time to think of liquor. When Saturday came and he found himself in possession of honestly earned funds he felt a soul-satisfying ease. He decided to invest his first savings in a present for Lorelei, then a graver sense of responsibility seized him, and he wrote to Mrs. Knight as follows:

My dear Mother-in-New-Jersey-law,—Inclosed find five handsome examples of the engraver's skill, same being the result of six industrious days. I know your passion for these *objets d'art*, I appreciate your eagerness to share my father's celebrated collection, and I join you in regrets at your failure to do so. But remember, "As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man." Take these photogravures, love them, cherish them, share them with the butcher, the baker, the hobble-skirt maker, and console yourself with the thought that, although you have lost much, you have gained something above price in me.

Thine in everlasting fetters,

Robert.

Having despatched this missive, he set out to find Jim, for the afternoon was young and he wished to settle his obligations in full. It is well to be systematic; business is largely a matter of system, anyhow, and the tag ends of one week's work should never be allowed to lap over into another.

A round of popular up-town resorts failed to discover Jim, but Bob's search finally brought him to Tony the Barber's shop; and here, in the rear room, he found his brother-in-law playing cards with a pop-eyed youth and a repellent person with a cauliflower ear.

Bob's greeting was hearty. "Evening, James," he cried. "Feel like taking your beating here?"

"Eh? What's the matter?" Jim rose from his chair with a shocked intensity of gaze.

"I'm just cleaning up my affairs for the day of rest, and I've come to return your last call. Alas, James, I am a weak vessel! Your work was coarse, but I fell for it." To the other occupants of the room he apologized. "I'm sorry to spoil your little game of authors, but necessity prods me." He extended a muscular hand for Jim's collar and found it.

Mr. Armistead was of the emotional kind; he leaped to his feet and went to the rescue of his friend; but his first blow was wild. Seizing a chair, he swung it aloft—a manœuver which more effectively distracted Bob's attention—but this attack also failed when Bob's fist buried itself in the spongy region of Mr. Armistead's belt-buckle, and that young man promptly lost all interest in Jimmy Knight's affairs. There had been a time when he might have weathered such a blow, but of late years easy living had left its marks; therefore he sat down heavily, all but missing the chair he had just occupied. His eyes bulged more prominently than usual; he became desperately concerned with a strange difficulty in breathing.

Alert, aggressive, Bob turned to face the man with

the swollen ear; but young Sullivan, being a professional fighter, made no capital of amateur affairs, and declined the issue with an upraised palm.

"Friends, eh?" Bob panted.

"Brothers!" heartily ejaculated Sullivan, whereupon Bob foiled Jimmy Knight's short cut for the door and proceeded with the purpose of his call.

It was no difficult matter to chastise Jim, whose spirit was as wretched as his strength; as the wind whips a flag, as a man flaps a dusty garment, so did Bob shake his victim. Jim felt his spine crack and his limbs unjoint. His teeth snapped, he bit his tongue, his heels rattled upon the floor. Bob seemed bent upon shaking the bones from his flesh and the marrow from his bones; but, try as he would, Jim could not prevent the outrage. He struggled, he clawed, he kicked, he yelled; his arms threshed loosely, like the limber appendages to a stuffed figure.

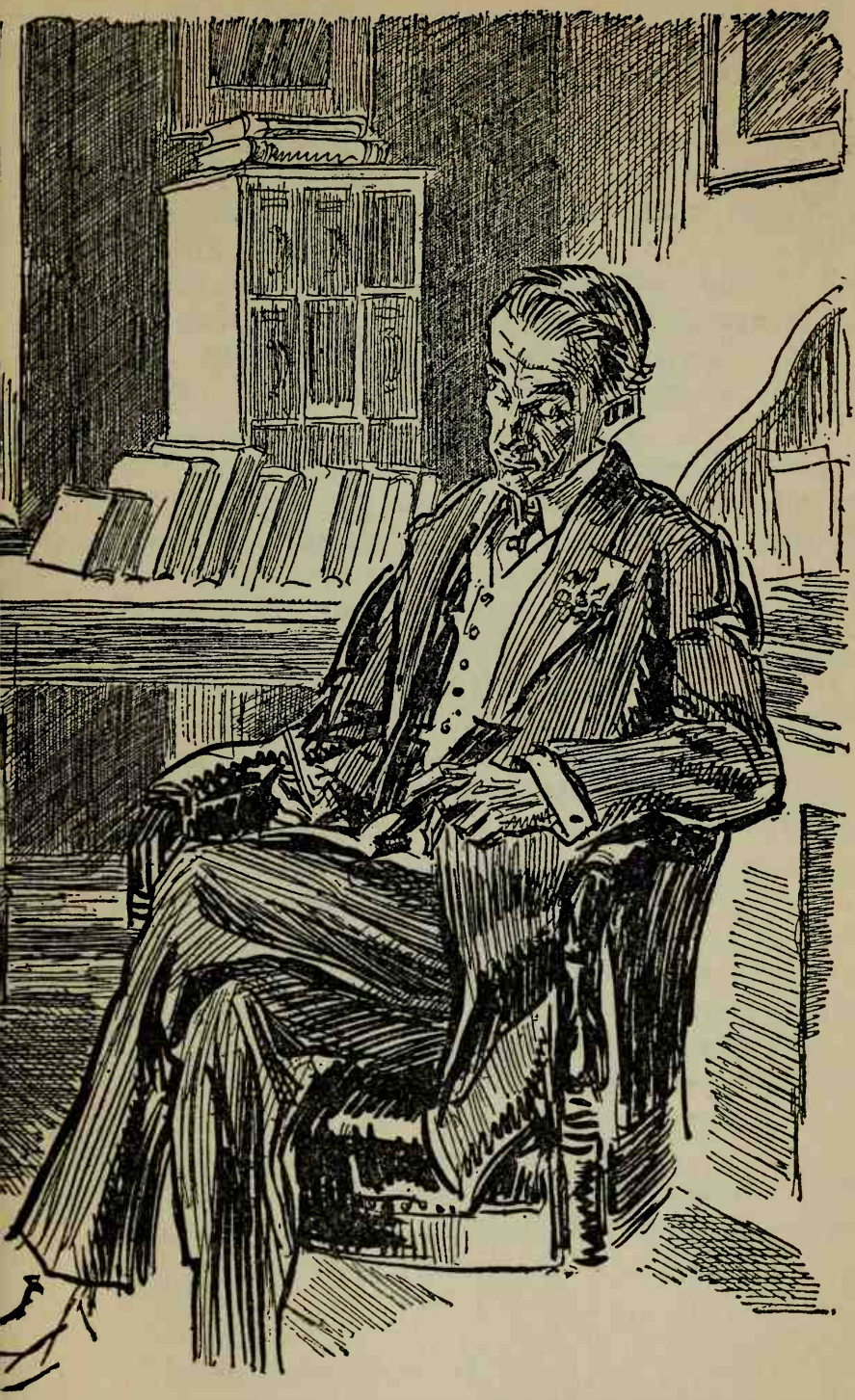
Mr. Amistead, unnaturally pale, remained seated. He emitted harrowing sounds like those made by air leaking into a defective pump. Sullivan looked on with the lively appreciation of a rough-house expert.

When Bob emerged from the rear room he found the barber shop in confusion. Tony was leading a charge at the head of his assistants, who were supported in turn by the customers; but he fell back at sight of the flushed victor.

"It was nothing but a little family affair," Bob reassured him. "Now, if you please, I'll borrow a hair-brush." In front of a mirror he tidied himself, settled his scarf with a deft jerk, then went out whistling. As it was nearly closing-time for the matinées, he strolled toward the Circuit Theater, full of a satisfying contentment with the world. Now that he owed it nothing, he resolved to meet his future obligations as they arose.

Early on Monday morning Bob reported for work, only

He succeeded in borrowing a thousand dollars, wit



hich he bought Lorelei a set of black opals.

to receive from Mr. Crosset, whom he had always regarded as a warm friend, the notice of his discharge.

"What's the matter? Didn't I make good?" he demanded.

Crosset was a young man; more than once he and Bob had scandalized Broadway; some of their exploits were epic. Now he shrugged carelessly, saying:

"Oh, you made good, I guess; but we can't take a chance with you."

"I suppose you're afraid I'll steal some of your chalk."

Crosset grinned, then deponed with extreme gravity: "Bob, you drink. You're unsteady in your habits. It's too bad, but we can't—"

"I don't drink as much as you do."

"Nobody does; but that's beside the question."

"As a matter of fact, I've quit."

This announcement drew a hearty chuckle. "You're a great comedian, Bob," said Crosset.

After surveying his friend for a moment Bob responded with great earnestness: "But you're not. This fails to hand me a laugh. Now tell me, how did you wet your feet, and whence comes the icy draught?"

"Well, from the direction of Pittsburg, if you must know. It seems you are an undesirable citizen, Bob—a dangerous character. There's a can tied to you, and we can't afford to antagonize the whole Steel Trust."

"I see. I'm afraid I'll have to disown that father of mine."

"What's the trouble, anyhow?"

At Bob's explanation Crosset whistled. "Funny I didn't hear about it. Married and happy, eh? Well, I'm sorry I can't help you—"

"You can."

"How?"

"Lend me five hundred."

"Certainly!" Crosset lunged at his desk, scribbled a

line to the cashier, and handed it to Bob, then, in response to a call from the customers' room, dashed away with a hearty farewell.

As Bob passed through the outer office he ran his eye over the opening prices, being half inclined to "scalp" with his sudden wealth; but luck had never run his way, and he reconsidered. Anyhow, there were more agreeable uses to which he could put this money; for one thing he needed several suits, for another it was high time he gave Lorelei some little remembrance—he hadn't given her a present in nearly two weeks, and women set great store by such attentions. He decided to invest his money in Maiden Lane and demand credit from his tailor. But a half-hour at a jewelry shop convinced him that nothing suitable to so splendid a creature as his wife could be purchased for a paltry five hundred dollars, and he was upon the point of returning to Crosset with a request to double the loan when his common sense asserted itself. Poverty was odious, but not shameful, he reflected; ostentation, on the other hand, was vulgar. Would it not be in bad taste to squander this happy windfall upon jewelry when Lorelei needed practical things?

Bob was cheered by the breadth of these sentiments; they showed that he was beginning soberly to realize the leaden responsibilities of a family man. No, instead of a jewel he would buy his wife a dog.

At a fashionable up-town kennel he found exactly what he wanted, in the shape of a Pekingese—a playful, pedigreed pocket dog scarcely larger than his two fists. It was a creature to excite the admiration of any woman; its family tree was taller than that of a Spanish nobleman, and its name was Ying. But here again Bob was handicapped by poverty, for sleeve dogs are expensive novelties, and the price of Ying was seven hundred dollars—marked down from one thousand, and evidently the bargain of a lifetime at that price.

THE AUCTION BLOCK

Bob hated to haggle, but he showed that his ability to drive a sharp bargain was merely latent, and he finally bore the animal away in triumph. To outgeneral a dog-fancier was a tribute to his shrewdness; to save two hundred dollars on a single purchase was economy of a high order. Much elated, he set out briskly for his tailor's place of business.

CHAPTER XXI

IT still lacked something of luncheon-time when Bob Wharton swung into Fifth Avenue with Ying snugly ensconced in his coat pocket. Bob was in fine fettle, what with the anticipation of Lorelei's delight at his gift and the certainty of an agreeable hour with his tailor. It was always a pleasure to deal with Kurtz, for in his shop customers were treated with the most delicate consideration. Salesmen, cutters, fitters, all were pleasant acquaintances who displayed neither the fawning obsequiousness of Fifth Avenue tradespeople nor the sullen apathy of Broadway clerks. Kurtz himself was an artist; he was also a person of generally cultivated taste and a man about town. His pleasure in making a sale was less than his delight at meeting and serving his customers, and his books were open only to those he considered his equals. A stony-faced doorman kept watch and ward in the Gothic hallway to discourage the general public from entering the premises. The fact that Bob owed several hundred dollars dismayed that young man not in the least, for Kurtz never mentioned money matters—the price of garments being after all of far less consequence than fit, and style, and that elusive something which Kurtz called "effect."

Our daily actions are controlled by a variety of opposing influences which are like threads pulling at us from various directions. When for any reason certain of these threads are snapped and the balance is disturbed we are drawn into strange pathways, and our whole lives may be

changed through the operation of what seems a most trivial case. In Bob's case the cause approached, all unheralded, in the person of Mr. Richard Cady, a youth whose magnificent vacuity of purpose was the envy of his friends. Comet-like, he was destined to appear, flash brightly, then disappear below the horizon of this tale. Mr. Cady greeted Bob with listless enthusiasm, teetering the while upon his cane like a Japanese equilibrist.

"Haven't seen you for ages," he began. "Been abroad?"

Bob explained that he was spending the summer in New York, a statement that filled his listener with the same horror he would have felt had he learned that Bob was passing the heated season in the miasmatic jungles of the Amazon.

"Just ran down from Newport," Cady volunteered. "I'm sailing to-day. Better join me for a trip. I know—" he cut Bob's refusal short—"travel's an awful nuisance; I get seasick myself."

"Then why play at it?"

Cady rolled a mournful eye upon his friend. "Girl!" said he, hollowly. "Show-girl! If I stay I'll marry her, and that wouldn't do. Posi-*tive*-ly not! So I'm running away. I'll wait over if you'll join me."

"I'm a working-man."

"Haw!" Mr. Cady expelled a short laugh.

"True! And I've quit drinking."

Now Cady was blasé, but he had a heart; his sympathies were slow, but he was not insensible to misfortune. Accordingly he responded with a cry of pity, running his eye over his friend to estimate the ravages of Temperance. Midway in its course his gaze halted, he passed a silk-gloved palm lightly across his brow, and looked again. A tiny head seemed to protrude from Bob's pocket, a pair of bright, inquiring eyes seemed to be peering directly at the observer.

"I—guess I'd better quit, too," said Cady, faintly. "Are you—alone?"

Bob gently extracted Ying from his resting-place, and the two men studied him gravely.

"Little beggar, isn't he?" Cady remarked. "Has he got a brother? I'd like to give one to—you know!"

"He's alone in the world. I'm his nearest of kin."

"Give you five dollars for him," Cady offered.

"I just paid five hundred, and he's worth a thousand. Why, his people came over ahead of the *Mayflower*."

The gloomy lover was interested; in his face there gleamed a faint desire. "Think of it! Well, make it a thousand. I'll send him in a bunch of orchids. Haw!" He doubled over his stick, convulsed with appreciation of his own originality. But again Bob refused. "Don't be nasty, I'll make it fifteen hundred."

Bob carefully replaced the canine atom and grinned at his friend.

"I need the money, but—nothing doing."

"Up against it?" hopefully inquired the other.

"Broke! I couldn't afford a nickel to see an earthquake."

"I'll lend you fifteen hundred and take Ying as security."

But Bob remained inflexible, and Mr. Cady relapsed into gloom, muttering:

"Gee! You're a rotten business man!"

"So says my heartless father. He has sewed up my pockets and scuttled my drawing-account, hence the dinner-pail on my arm. I'm in quest of toil."

"I'll bet you starve," brightly predicted Mr. Cady, in an effort at encouragement. "I'll lay you five thousand that you make a flivver of anything you try."

"I've quit gambling, too."

As they shook hands Cady grunted: "My invitation to globe-trot is withdrawn. Fine company you'd be!"

"I JUST paid five hundred, and he's worth a thousand. Why, his people came over ahead of the *Mayflower*."

As Bob walked up the Avenue he pondered deeply, wondering if he really were so lacking in ability as his friends believed. Money was such a common thing, after all; the silly labor of acquiring it could not be half so interesting as the spending of it. Anybody could make money, but to enjoy it, to circulate it judiciously, one must possess individuality—of a sort. Money seemed to come to some people without effort, and from the strangest sources—Kurtz, for instance, had grown rich out of coats and trousers!

Bob halted, frowning, while Ying peered out from his hiding-place at the passing throngs, exposing a tiny, limp, pink-ribbon tongue. If Kurtz, armed only with a pair of shears and a foolish tape, had won to affluence, why couldn't another? Stock-broking was no longer profitable; none of Bob's friends had earned their salt for months; and old Hannibal's opposition evidently forced a change of occupation.

The prospect of such a change was annoying, but scarcely alarming to an ingrained optimist, and Bob took comfort in reflecting that the best-selling literature of the day was replete with instances of disinherited sons, impoverished society men, ruined bankers, or mere idlers, who by lightning strokes of genius had mended their fortunes overnight. Some few, in the earlier days of frenzied fiction, had played the market, others the ponies, still others had gone West and developed abandoned gold-mines or obscure water-powers. A number also had grown disgustingly rich from patenting rat-traps or shoe-buttons. One young man had discovered a way to keep worms out of railroad-ties and had promptly bludgeoned the railroad companies out of fabulous royalties.

Over the stock-market idea Bob could work up no enthusiasm—he knew too much about it—and, inasmuch as horse-racing was no longer fashionable, opportunities for a Pittsburg Phil future seemed limited. Moreover,

he had never saved a jockey's life nor a jockey's mother from eviction, hence feed-box tips were not likely. Nor did he know a single soul in the business of inventing rat-traps or shoe-buttons. As for going West, he was clearly of the opinion that a search for abandoned gold-mines or forgotten waterfalls wasn't in his line; and the secret of creosoting railroad-ties, now that he came to think of it, was still locked up in the breast of its affluent discoverer. Besides, as the whole episode had occurred in the second act of a play, the safety of building upon it was doubtful at best.

No, evidently the well-recognized short cuts to wealth had all been obliterated by many feet, and he must find another. But where? At length Bob's wrinkled brow smoothed itself, and he nodded. His path was plain; it led around the nearest corner to his tailor's door.

Mr. Kurtz's greeting was warm as Bob strolled into the stately show-room with its high-backed Flemish-oak chairs, its great carved tables, its paneled walls with their antlered decorations. This, it may be said, was not a shop, not a store where clothes were sold, but a studio where men's distinctive garments were draped, and the difference was perfectly apparent on the first of each month.

Bob gave Ying his freedom, to the great interest of the proprietor, who studied the dog's points with a practised eye.

"Kurtz," began Bob, abruptly, "I just bet Dick Cady five thousand dollars that I can make my own living for six months." This falsehood troubled him vaguely until he remembered that high finance must be often conducted behind a veil.

Mr. Kurtz, genial, shrewd, gray, raised admiring eyes from the capering puppy and said:

"I'll take another five thousand."

But Bob declined. "No, I'm going to work."

This announcement interested the tailor deeply. "Who's going to hire you?" he asked.

"You are."

Kurtz blinked. "Maybe you'd like to bet on that, too," he ventured. "I'll give you odds."

"Work is one of the few things I haven't tried. You need a good salesman."

"No, I don't. I have seven already."

"Say, wouldn't you like the trade of the whole younger set? I can bring you a lot of fresh customers—fellows like me."

"'Fresh customers' is right," laughed Kurtz, then sobered quickly. "You're joking, of course?"

"I'm so serious I could cry. How much is it worth to you to make clothes for my crowd?"

"Well—" the tailor considered. "Quite a bit."

"The boys like to see Dick trimmed—it's a matter of principle with them never to let him win a bet—and they'd do anything for me. You're the best tailor in the city, but too conservative. Now I'm going to bring you fifty new accounts, every one good for better than two thousand a year. That's a hundred thousand dollars. How much am I offered? Going! Going!—"

"Wait a minute! Would you stick to me for six months if I took you on?"

"My dear Kurtz, I'll poultice myself upon you for life. I'll guarantee myself not to slide, slip, wrinkle, or skid. Thirty years hence, when you come hobbling down to business, you'll find me here."

Mr. Kurtz dealt in novelties, and the idea of a society salesman was sufficiently new to appeal to his commercial sense.

"I'll pay you twenty per cent.," he offered, "for all the new names you put on my books."

"Make it twenty-five on first orders and twenty on repeaters. I'll bring my own luncheon and pay my car-fare."

"There wouldn't be any profit left," demurred Kurtz.

"Good! Then it's a bargain—twenty-five and twenty. Now watch me grab the adolescent offshoots of our famous Four Hundred." Bob chased Ying into a corner, captured him, then took a 'bus up the Avenue to the College Club for luncheon.

At three o'clock he returned, accompanied by four flushed young men whose names gave Kurtz a thrill. In spite of their modish appearance they declared themselves indecently shabby, and allowed Bob to order for them—a favor which he performed with a Rajah's lofty disregard of expense. He sat upon one of the carved tables, teasing Ying, and selecting samples as if for a quartette of bridegrooms. Being bosom cronies of Mr. Cady, the four youths needed little urging. When they had gone in to be measured Kurtz said guardedly:

"Whew! That's more stuff than I've sold in two weeks!"

"A mere trifle," Bob grinned, happily. "Say, Kurtz, this is the life! This is the job for me—panhandling juvenile plutocrats—no office hours, no heavy lifting, and Thursdays off. I'm going to make you famous."

"You'll break me with another run like this."

"How much did they order?"

The proprietor ran over his figures incredulously.

"Twenty-four sack suits, two riding-suits, one knicker, four evening suits, four dinner-suits, forty fancy waistcoats, sixteen evening waistcoats, four pairs riding-breeches, four motor-coats, three Vicuna overcoats, two ulsters. You don't think they're bluffing?"

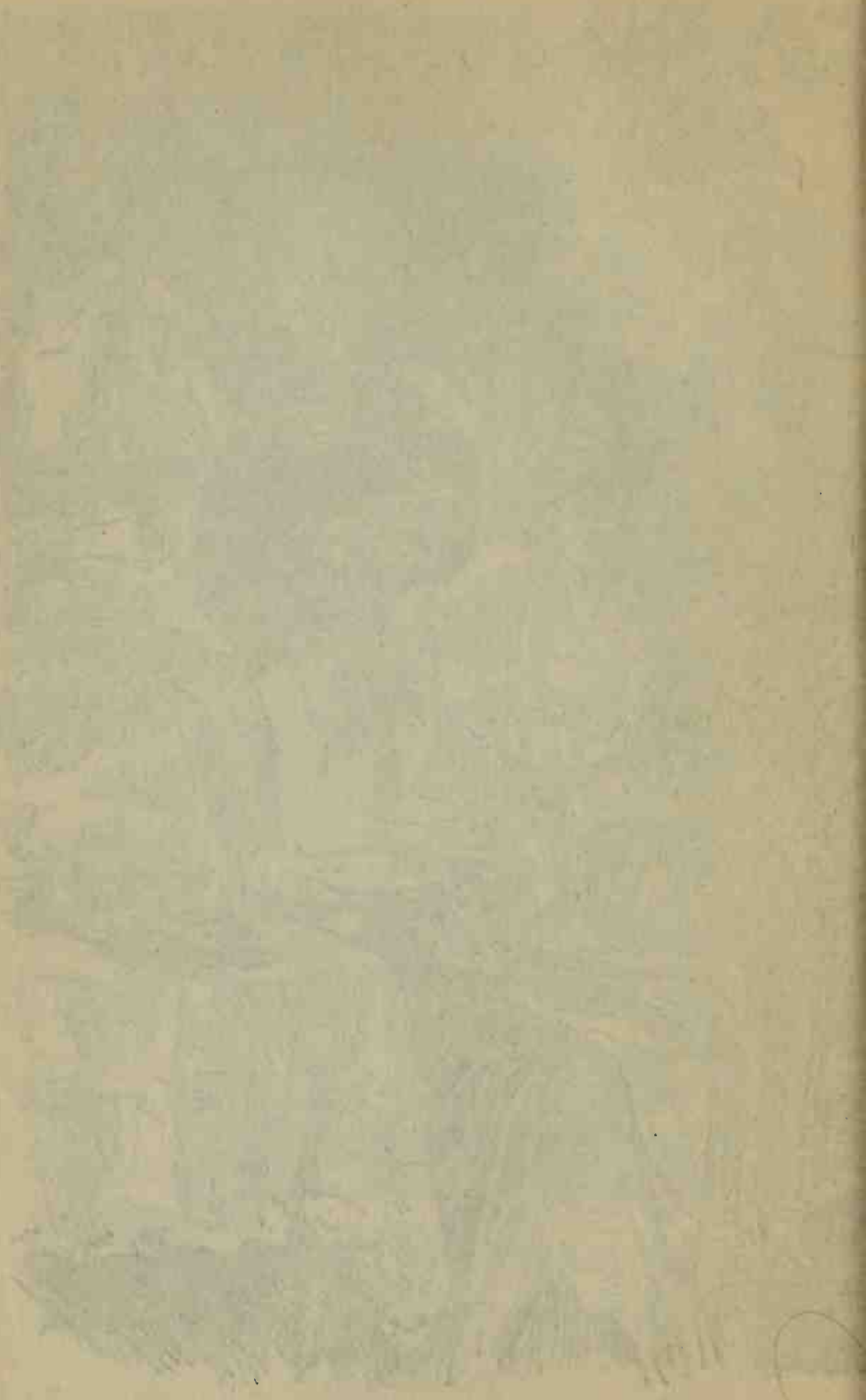
"Why should they bluff? They'll never discover how many suits they have. Now figure it up and tell me the bad news."

Mr. Kurtz did as directed, announcing, "Fifty-five hundred and five dollars."

"Pikers!" exclaimed the new salesman; then he began

THERE were a few embarrassing moments when she appraisal of the other women made her easy.

felt critical eyes measuring her, but her first instinctive



laboriously to compute twenty-five per cent. of the sum, using as a pad a bolt of expensive white-silk vest material. "Thirteen hundred and seventy-six dollars and twenty-five cents is my blackmail, Kurtz. That's what I call 'a safe and sane Fourth.' Not bad for dull times, and yet it might be better. Anyhow, it's the hardest thirteen hundred and seventy-six dollars I ever earned."

"Hard!" The merchant's lips twitched, oscillating his cigar violently. "Hard! I'll bet those fellows even bought your lunch. I suppose you mean it's the first money you ever—earned." He seemed to choke over the last word. "Well, it's worth something to get men like these on the books, but—thirteen hundred and seventy-six dollars—"

"And twenty-five cents."

Mr. Kurtz gulped. "In one day! Why, I could buy a farm for that. How much will you have to 'earn' to cover your living expenses for six months?"

"Ah, there we journey into the realm of purest speculation." Bob favored him with a sunny smile. "As well ask me how much my living expenses must be in order to cover my earnings. Whatever one is, the other will be approximately ditto—or perhaps slightly in excess thereof. Anyhow, nothing but rigid economy—bane of my life—will make the one fit into the other. But I have a thought. Something tells me these boys need white flannels, so get out your stock, Kurtz. If they can't play tennis they must learn, for my sake."

Bob's remarkable stroke of fortune called for a celebration, and his four customers clamored that he squander his first profits forthwith. Ordinarily such a course would have been just to his liking; but now he was dying to tell Lorelei of his triumph, and, fearing to trust himself with even one drink, he escaped from his friends as soon as possible. Thus it chanced that he arrived home sober.

It was a happy home-coming, for Ying was adorable

and made his way instantly into Lorelei's heart, while Bob was in a state of exaltation. He had no desire to bind himself to Kurtz's service for six months or for any other period; nor had he the least thought of living up to his agreement until Lorelei began to treat the matter seriously. Then he objected blankly:

"Why, it was all right as a joke, but I don't want to be a *tailor*. There's no romance in woolen goods."

"How much do you owe?" she asked.

"Really, I've no idea. It's something you don't have to remember—somebody always reminds you in plenty of time, and then you borrow enough to pay up."

"Let's forget the romance and pay up without borrowing. Remember you have two families to support." Noting that the idea of permanent employment galled him, she added, craftily, "Of course you'll never sell another lot of clothes like this, but—"

"Why not? It's like selling candy to a child."

"You can't go with that crowd without drinking."

"Is that so? Now you sit tight and hold your hat on. I can make that business pay if I try, and still stay in the Rain-makers' Union. There's big money in it—enough so we can live the way we want to. I'm sick of this telephone-booth, anyhow; we'll present it to some nice newsboy and rent an apartment with a closet. This one's so small I don't dare to let my trousers bag. Besides, we've been under cover long enough, and I want you to meet the people I know. We can afford the expense—now that I'm making thirteen hundred and seventy-six dollars and twenty-five cents a day."

"I should like to know nice people," Lorelei confessed. "I'm sick of the kind I've met; the men are indecent and the women are vulgar. I've always wanted to know the other kind."

Bob was delighted; his fancy took fire, and already he was far along toward prosperity. "You'll make a hit

with the younger set; you'll be a perfect rave. Bert Hayman told me to-day that his married sister is entertaining a lot, and, since the drama will be tottering on its way to destruction without you in a few days, I'll tell him to see that we're invited out to Long Island for a week-end."

CHAPTER XXII

UNDER Lorelei's encouragement Bob put in the next two weeks to good advantage. In fact, so obsessed was he with his new employment that it was not long before his imaginary bet with Cady assumed reality in his mind. Moreover, it became gossip around his clubs; and in quarters where he was well known his method of winning the wager was deemed not only characteristic, but ingenious. His exploits were famous; and his friends, rejoicing in one more display of eccentricity, and relishing any mild misfortune to Dick Cady, in the majority of cases changed tailors.

Business at Kurtz's increased so substantially that Bob was treated with a reverential amazement by every one in the shop. The other salesmen gazed upon him with envy; Kurtz's bearing changed in a way that was extremely gratifying to one who had been universally accounted a failure. And Bob expanded under success; he began to feel more than mere amusement in his experiment.

His marriage in some way had become public, but, although it occasioned some comment, the affair was too old to be of much news value, and therefore it did not get into the papers except as an announcement. Now that he had escaped the disagreeable notoriety he had expected and was possessed of larger means, Bob—inordinately proud of his wife's beauty and boyishly eager to display it—undertook to win social recognition for her. It was no difficult task for one with his wide acquaintance

to make a beginning. Lorelei was surprised and delighted one day to receive an invitation for her and her husband to spend a week-end at Fennellcourt, the country home of Bert Hayman's sister.

She had not been sorry to give up her theatrical work, and the prospect of meeting nice people, of leaving for good and all the sordid, unhealthy atmosphere of Broadway, bathed her in a glow of anticipation. She had considerable knowledge of rich men, in their hours of recreation at least, but of their women she knew little, and nothing whatever of the life which went on in exclusive circles. During the fortnight of preparation before the visit her feelings more nearly approached stage-fright than upon the occasion of her first public appearance.

Fennellcourt is one of the show-places of the Wheatley Hills section. The house itself is a pretentious structure of brick and terra-cotta, crowning a hill. A formal and a sunken garden—the latter with a pergola and a Temple of Venus—grassy terraces, rows and clumps of ornamental trees and dwarfed shrubs, dazzling patches of flowers and empty green lawns, evidence the skill of a highly paid landscape-artist; while stables, greenhouses, a natatorium, tennis and squash courts in the background, testify to the expensive habits of the owners. The gardens are a feature of the estate; a fortune is represented in the stone pools, the massive urns, the statuary, and the potted plants. Spotless, brilliant-hued tiled walks lead between riotous beds ablaze with every color, and the main driveway swings to the crest of a ridge that overlooks this charming prospect.

Bert Hayman drove the Whartons out from the city, and Lorelei's first glimpse of Fennellcourt was such that she forgot her vague dislike of Hayman himself. Bert, who had met her and Bob for luncheon, had turned out to be, instead of a polished man of the world, a glib youth with an artificial laugh and a pair of sober, heavy-

lidded eyes. Lorelei's shyness at meeting him had quickly disappeared when she found that he knew more theatrical people than she and that he was quite unable to talk interestingly about anything except choruses and coryphees. Of the former he was a merciless critic, of the latter he was an enthusiastic supporter. That he possessed a keen appreciation of feminine beauty he showed by surrendering unconditionally to Lorelei's charms. She might have been flattered had he not pressed his attentions over-boldly. As it was, seeing that Bob was pleased at the tribute to his wife's loveliness rather than offended at his friend's effrontery, she did her best to smother her resentment.

As Hayman's car rolled up the driveway and the beauties of Fennellcourt displayed themselves Lorelei found her heart throbbing violently. Was not this the beginning of a glorious adventure? Was not life unfolding at last? Was she not upon the threshold of a new world? The flutter in her breast was answer.

Bert led the way through an impressive hall that bisected the building, then out upon a stately balustraded stone terrace, where, in the grateful shade of gaudy awnings, a dozen people were chatting at tea-tables.

Mrs. Fennell, the hostess, a plain-faced, dumpy young matron, welcomed the new-comers, then made Lorelei known. As for Bob, he needed no introductions; a noisy outburst greeted him, and Lorelei's heart warmed at the welcome. There were a few embarrassing moments when she felt critical eyes measuring her, but her first instinctive appraisal of the other women made her easy. It needed no more than a modest estimate of her own attractions to tell her that she was the smartest person in this smart assembly; the swift, startled admiration of the men proved it beyond question.

A few moments of chatter, then she and Bob were led into the house again and up to a cool, wide bedroom.

As Lorelei removed her motor-coat and bonnet she exclaimed breathlessly: "What a gorgeous house! And those people! They weren't the least bit formal."

Bob laughed. "Formality is about the last thing they're famous for. There's liable to be too much informality. Say! You made those dames look like the Monday morning wash-ladies' parade. I knew you would."

"You said this was the younger set—but that awful Thompson-Bellaire widow is here, and that blonde girl I met with her."

"Alice Wyeth?"

"Yes. I thought she was going to kiss you."

Bob grinned. "So did I. She will, too, if she feels like it."

"Won't you have anything to say about it?"

"What could I say? Alice does just as she likes. So does everybody else, for that matter. I've never gone in for this sort of thing very much."

After a moment Lorelei ventured, "I suppose they're all hard drinkers—"

"That wasn't spring water you saw in their glasses."

"Are you—going to?" Lorelei eyed him anxiously.

"I can't very well make myself conspicuous by refusing everything; I don't want to look like a zebra in a hen-yard—and a cocktail before dinner wouldn't hurt anybody." Noting his wife's expression he kissed her lightly. "Now don't spoil your first party by worrying over me. Just forget you're married and have a good time."

Music greeted them as they descended the stairs, and they found some of the guests dancing to the strains of a giant orchestrion built into the music-room. Hayman promptly seized upon Lorelei and whirled her away, but not before she saw the Wyeth blonde making for Bob as an eagle makes for its prey.

Society was tango-mad. The guests could not wait for evening, but indulged their latest fancy in the open

air and in the light of day. Doubtless the Naiads used to dance in daylight, when they made merry, but modern terpsichorean figures are suitable only for the evening. The spectacle of a red-faced, harem-skirted matron wabbling through a one-step, her billowing amplitude restrained only by a boneless six-inch corset, is even less classic than the antics of a dancing bear.

Guests continued to arrive from time to time; some from Westchester and the Connecticut shore, others from neighboring estates. One couple in riding-clothes, out for a gallop, dismounted and stayed for a trot. The huge tiled terrace began to resemble a Broadway *thé dansant.*

There was more freedom, more vivacity, than Lorelei was accustomed to, even in the gayest down-town resorts; the fun was swift and hilarious, there was a great deal of drinking. Bob, after a manful struggle against his desires and a frightened resistance to the advances of Miss Wyeth, had fled to the billiard-room. The Widow T.-B., odorous of cocktails, plowed through the intricacies of the latest dances, wallowing like a bluff-bowed tramp steamer, full to the hatches with a cargo of rum and sugar. Bert Hayman, fatuously inflamed with Lorelei's beauty, waged a bitter contest with the other men for her favor. He appropriated her, he was affectionate; he ventured to become suggestive in a snickering, covert way. His intimate manner of dancing would not have been tolerated in any public place, and Lorelei was upon the point of objecting, until she saw that the others, men and women alike, were exaggerating the movements and entwining their limbs even more pronouncedly. Harden Fennell, Lorelei's host, explained:

"We don't dance in the cafés any more. They're so strict it's no fun."

Fennell was a slight man of thirty or fifty, colorless of face and predatory of nose. He had a shocking sense of humor, which he displayed by telling Lorelei a story that

left her mute with indignation until she saw that he was quite unconscious of any breach of etiquette. When he finally left her she was sadly bewildered and found herself wondering if the occurrences of this afternoon were not a part of some bad dream. Certainly such an erotic atmosphere could not be considered "smart," this complete freedom from restraint could not be a recognized social usage. The suspicion that Fennell had presumed upon her reputation as a show-girl to lower the bars of decorum troubled her until she heard him repeat his vile story to other women. From the general laughter she judged that her own ideas would be thought Puritanical.

She became interested in watching Miss Courtenay, the girl in the riding-habit, one of the season's débutantes, who, it seemed, was especially susceptible to the influence of liquor.

"If you shake a bar-towel at Elizabeth she goes under the table," Bert Hayman explained. "We love to get her full." It excited great merriment when, some time later, Miss Courtenay had to be sent home in an automobile, leaving her saddle-horse to be led by her escort.

Lorelei was glad when it came time to dress for dinner. As she went to her room Mrs. Fennell stopped her on the stairs to say:

"My dear, you're stunning in that little black and white. Where did you get it?"

Lorelei gave her the name of her tailor.

"Really! I never heard of her." Mrs. Fennell smiled and laid a soft hand upon her guest's arm. "Elizabeth Courtenay was frantically jealous of you."

"Of me? I don't understand."

"She and Bert are great friends—and he's gone perfectly daft over you. Why, he's telling everybody." Lorelei flushed, to the evident amusement of her hostess, who ran on: "Oh, Bert means it! I never heard him rave so. Quite a compliment, my dear! He declares he's going to

win you, so make up your mind to it—he never takes 'no' for an answer." With a playful pat she went on her way, leaving the young wife weak with dismay.

When Bob came in he betrayed an elation only too familiar.

"You've been drinking!" cried Lorelei.

"I had to; I ran fifteen three times. My abstinence is the marvel of the whole party. Why, Clayton has composed a song about it."

"I'm afraid—"

"Say! You can't help sneezing when you have a cold. What's a fellow going to do in a crowd like this? But don't worry, I know when to quit."

In truth he did seem better able to take care of himself than most of the men Lorelei had seen, so she said no more.

As he throttled himself with his evening tie Bob gasped: "Having a good time?"

"Ye-es!" Lorelei could not summon courage for a negative answer; she could not confess that her dream had turned out wretchedly, and that what Bob seemed to consider simply the usual thing impressed her as abnormal and wanton.

"Well, that's good," he said. "I'm not strong for these week-end slaughters, but it's something you'll have to do."

"Is all society like—this?" she inquired.

"Um-m, yes and no! Society is like a layer-cake—"

"Because it's made of dough?"

Bob laughed. "Partly! Anyhow, the upper crust is icy, and while the lower layer is just as rich as those above, it's more indigestible. There's the heavy, soggy layers in between, too. I don't know any of that crowd. They're mostly Dodos—the kind that endow colleges. This younger set keeps the whole cake from getting tasteless."

After a while Lorelei ventured: "I'm still a little nervous. I wish you'd stay close to me this evening."

"Can't be done," Bob declared. "It's a rule at Fennellcourt that husbands must ignore their wives. Betty doesn't invite many married couples, and a wife-lover is considered a pest. When in Rome do as the tourists do."

Lorelei finished dressing in silence.

Dinner was quite different to anything Bob's wife had ever experienced, and if the afternoon had been embarrassing to her the evening was a trial. As the cocktails were served, Harden Fennell distinguished himself by losing his balance and falling backward, to the great amusement of his guests. No one went to his assistance; he regained his feet by climbing a high-backed chair, hand over hand, and during the dinner he sat for the most part in a comatose state, his eyes bleared and staring, his tongue unresponsive. Lorelei had little opportunity of watching him, since Bert Hayman monopolized her attention. The latter made love openly, violently now, and it added to her general disgust to see that Bob had again fallen into the clutches of Miss Wyeth, who made no secret of her fondness for him.

Lorelei was not the only one to take special note of the blonde girl's infatuation. Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire was equally observant and at length made her disapproval patent by a remark that set the table laughing and drove the blood from Lorelei's face. As if further to vent her resentment at Bob, the widow turned spitefully upon his wife. Seeing Lorelei wince, Hayman murmured consolingly: "Oh! Don't mind the old heifer. She's jealous of any man Alice speaks to."

But Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire seemed to take a quenchless delight in embarrassing her victim, and sometime later Lorelei heard her explain to the man on her right:

"We weren't surprised in the least. . . . Bob's always doing some crazy thing when he's drunk. . . . His latest

fancy . . . pretty, of course, but . . . from some Western village, I believe . . . can't possibly last. Why should it?" The words were purposely made audible, and during the rest of the meal, when Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire was not bitingly sarcastic to Lorelei, she was offensively patronizing.

Bert Hayman, it transpired, was not only an authority on musical comedies and pony ballets, but he was equally well posted on dogs, and a débutante across the table appealed to him for advice in breeding an Airedale bitch she had purchased at the last show. The discussion that followed was sufficiently frank to embarrass the aristocratic Airedale herself had she been present, but it did not appear to shock the diners.

Mrs. Madden, a neighbor, who was a leader in the polo set, dropped in for coffee and a cigarette. Lorelei was surprised to see her clad in a well-fitting man's dinner-suit. Mrs. Madden's hair was tightly drawn back, with a neat part on the left side; she smoked extra large cigarettes, from a man's jeweled case; her voice was coarse, her mannerisms distinctly masculine. Nor was this eccentricity a passing whim; she masqueraded thus—so Hayman affirmed—whenever she dared, and had once attempted to attend a horse-show in trousers.

After dinner Lorelei had a better opportunity than during the afternoon of becoming acquainted with the women of the party, but the experience was not pleasant. Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire had struck a popular note by patronizing her, and the other women followed suit. Lorelei amused and interested them in a casual way, but she was made to understand that they regarded her not as Bob's wife in any real sense, but rather as his latest and most fleeting fancy. His marriage they seemed to look upon as a bizarre adventure, such as might happen to any man in their set who was looking for amusement.

There was more dancing during the evening. Miss

Society was tango-mad. The guests could not wait for

vening, but indulged their latest fancy in the open air.

Wyeth continued to monopolize Bob, and Lorelei was offended to note that his resistance gave signs of weakening. She smothered her feelings, however, and remonstrated gently, only to find that he was in no condition to listen. The dinner had been too much for him.

There were many gaieties to enliven the party, and, although outward decencies were observed after a fashion, Lorelei was sickened by the sheer license that she felt on every hand. Unable to endure the growing heat of Hayman's advances, she slipped away at last and hid herself in another room, only to overhear a quarrel between Alice Wyeth and Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, the fierceness of which was only equaled by its absurdity. Lorelei stole out of the room again with ears burning; her dislike of the muscular widow had turned to loathing, and she was glad to return to the lights and laughter. She had a wild desire to make her excuses and escape from Fennell-court, but Bob had disappeared, and she gathered that he and Bert were playing off some fabulous wager in the billiard-room. Pleading a headache, she excused herself as soon as she could.

"So sorry," said Mrs. Fennell; then, with a knowing laugh: "There's no likelihood of Bob's annoying you for some time. Bertie will see to that."

CHAPTER XXIII

ONCE in her room, Lorelei gave way to the indignation that had been slowly growing in her breast. How dared Bob introduce her to such people! If this was the world in which he had moved before his marriage he had shown his wife an insult by bringing her into it. Surely people like the Fennells, Bert Hayman, Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, the Madden woman, were not typical members of New York's exclusive circles! Applied to them, 'smart' was a laughably inadequate term; they were worse than fast; they were frankly vicious. This was more than a gay week-end party; it was an orgy. Lorelei's anger at her betrayal was so keen that she dared not send for Bob immediately for fear of speaking too violently, but she assured herself that she would leave in the morning, even though he chose to remain.

Still in a blazing temper, she disrobed and sat down to calm herself and to wait for her husband. A half-hour passed, then another; at last she sent a maid in quest of him, but the report she received was not reassuring; Bob was scarcely in a condition to come to his room. Lorelei's lips were white as she dismissed the servant.

By and by the music ceased. She heard people passing in the hall, and distinguished Betty Fennell's voice bidding good night to some one. Still she waited.

Heavy with resentment, sick from disillusionment, she finally crept into bed, leaving one electric candle burning upon her dressing-table. Although she knew she could not sleep, she determined to postpone a scene with Bob by feigning slumber.

When the door opened with a cautious hand she closed her eyes and lay still. She heard Bob turn the key and tiptoe toward her, but even when he stood over her and she caught the odor of his garments she did not lift her lids. A moment passed, then some sixth sense gave her warning, and her eyes flew open.

Hayman was standing at the bedside, peering down at her. He extended a cautious hand, saying: "Don't make a fuss. Everything is all—"

Lorelei spoke sharply, but with a restraint that surprised her. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I—? Why, nothing especial. Had to tell you good night, you know." He laughed guardedly, nervously. She saw that he was considerably drunker than when she had escaped from his attentions, but evidently he knew quite well what he was about.

"Kindly get out, and close the door after you," she directed, still without raising her voice.

"The door's closed—and locked," he snickered. Lorelei sat up with eyes blazing. "Oh, don't worry about Bob," muttered Hayman, reassuringly. "Bob's good for two hours yet—I've seen to that—and he couldn't find his way up-stairs, anyhow. Say! I want to talk to you. You've got me going, Lorelei."

"You've been drinking, Mr. Hayman. I'm willing to think that you made a mistake in the room if you go at once."

The intruder took no warning from her crisp tones nor from the fact that her twilight eyes were as dark as a midnight sky. On the contrary, he suddenly bent low over her, his odorous breath beating into her face, his arms reaching for her.

With the lithe alertness of a leopard she evaded him; the next instant the bed was between them and she had whipped a negligée about her. For an instant they faced each other; then she pointed a quivering arm, gasping in a voice that sounded strange and throaty to her ears:

"Get out! Get out! You—beast!"

Hayman was unused to opposition. He had engineered this moment carefully; a galling anger rose to meet hers as he felt his labors wasted.

"Don't get flighty," he growled. "You knew I'd come, didn't you? Why'd you leave your door unlocked if you didn't expect me?"

Lorelei stepped to her dressing-table and pressed the pearl push-button, holding her finger upon it and staring at Hayman.

"Oh, ring and be damned!" he cried. "Call Bob. I'll tell him you asked me in." He moved toward her, his body swaying, his hands shaking, his face convulsed; but as he groped forward she snatched one of the electric candlesticks from among her toilet articles and swung it above her head. The fixture was of heavy brass, and its momentum ripped the connection from its socket; her arm was tense with the strength of utter loathing as she brought the weapon down. Hayman reeled away, covering his face with his hands and cursing wildly; then, profiting by his retreat, Lorelei was at the door, had turned the key, and was in the hall before he could prevent her. Guided more by instinct than by reason or memory, she found Mrs. Fennell's chamber and pounded upon its door with blind fury. She heard a stir from the direction whence she had come, and Hayman's voice calling something unintelligible; then Mrs. Fennell's startled face appeared before her.

"What's the matter? My *dear!* You'll wake everybody in the house."

"Your brother—forced his way into—my room."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Fennell drew her guest swiftly inside. "Hush! Don't make a show of yourself."

"Wha's all this?" came from Harden Fennell, who was sprawled in a chintz-covered easy-chair, minus coat,

waistcoat, and collar. He rose slowly as Lorelei, incoherent with rage, poured out her story. "Wha's trouble?" he mumbled. "Bob's all right—and so's Bert. They're both drunk, but Bob's the drunkes'. What 're you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"Be still!" his wife cried, sharply. "It's Bertie again." Then of Lorelei she inquired: "But why did you let him into your room if—if you were going to quarrel—"

"Mrs. Fennell!"

"Now, now! Don't be silly. Bertie didn't mean anything; he's intoxicated and—there's no harm done. You said you struck him with something. I presume he's hurt, and everybody in the house will know about it."

"Got into your room, eh?" Harden Fennell said, thickly, then exploded in moist laughter. "Bertie's work is all right, but it's coarse. Don't you mind him, Mrs. Wharton."

"Will you send some one for Bob?" Lorelei asked, more quietly. "I want to—leave."

But her hostess protested. "Now why stir up trouble? Bob is drunk; he and Bertie are old friends. Bertie will apologize in the morning, and—after all, it was nothing. I told you he was mad about you. He's just like any other man, and you shouldn't have encouraged him."

"Will you send for my husband?"

Mrs. Fennell's gaze hardened; she stiffened herself, saying coldly:

"Why, certainly, if you insist upon rousing the whole household; but he's in no condition to understand this silly affair. You might have *some* consideration for us."

"Sure!" echoed the husband. "Go to sleep and forget it. Don't spoil the party."

"You realize we have other guests?" snapped Mrs. Fennell.

Bright disks of color were burning in Lorelei's cheeks; she was smiling peculiarly.

"Rest easy," she said. "I've no wish to embarrass you nor to drag my husband into this rotten business. It seems he's as modern as the rest of you, but I'm—old-fashioned."

There came a knock at the door, and Hayman's voice, calling:

"Betty! Let me in!"

His sister opened the door an inch or two. "You mustn't come in now," she expostulated, then cried, sharply: "Why, you're badly hurt. You're all bloody!" As Hayman agreed in a burst of profanity she exclaimed fretfully: "Oh, this is dreadful! Go to your room, for Heaven's sake! I'll see what I can do with this—with Mrs. Wharton." Bert continued to growl until his brother-in-law led him away down the hall. Then Mrs. Fennell turned acidly upon her outraged guest. "Well, you've caused enough trouble, it seems to me, without involving the rest of us in it. A woman of your experience should be more careful. I'm sure Bertie never would have taken such a liberty if he hadn't thought you were accustomed to such things."

Lorelei broke out sharply. "You're as badly mistaken as your brother was. But—I should have been more careful; I suppose a woman of my experience shouldn't have come here at all. Now, I don't want to cause any trouble nor scandal, so if you'll permit me to thank you for your hospitality I'll leave at once."

"Leave? At this hour?"

"In ten minutes, if you'll rouse a chauffeur and let him drive me to the station."

"Nonsense! You can't get Bob—"

"Bob needn't know anything about it; I'm sure that will be pleasanter all around. I'll go alone." Lorelei's forced smile bared her even, white teeth. "Of course, if it's too much trouble I can walk—"

"No trouble at all." Mrs. Fennell showed some relief.

"I think you're acting very rudely—but I dare say it *would* save a lot of unpleasantness; Bertie's furious—he and Bob might fight. I—I'm dreadfully sorry. Still, I can't permit you—"

"In ten minutes, then. If there's no train I may ask your chauffeur to drive me into the city."

"Why, to be sure! Er—what shall I tell Bob when he asks for you?"

"Use your own judgment, please. You can handle drunken men better than I. And don't trouble to send a maid to my room. I'll be down-stairs when the car comes."

The hostess continued to demur feebly, but Lorelei cut short any further discussion, and, once behind her own locked door, she dressed with feverish haste. Her only desire now was to escape from Fennellcourt and all its guests as quickly as possible. Her thoughts concerning Bob at the moment were too much involved in anger at the Fennells and at Hayman to be quite coherent.

She was pacing the gloom of the porte-cochère when an automobile swung out from among the trees and swept the shadows flying with its brushes of flame. As she directed the driver, from an open window behind her came a drunken shout; a burst of men's laughter followed the car as it rolled away.

So that was the charmed circle to which she had aspired, those the people she had envied; behind her was that life to which she had sold herself, and this was the end of her dream of fine ladies and gallant gentlemen! Lorelei scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry. As she stared out at the night shapes capering past she felt acute personal shame that she had been tricked into even a brief association with so vile a crew. That uproar of men's voices rang in her ears like a jeering farewell, and she realized that in all probability her flight would appear

ridiculous to Bob's friends. Women like the kalsomined widow, the masculine matron, the jaded Wyeth girl, would echo that laughter and score her with their gossip on the morrow; the thought turned her mind bitterly toward Bob. He had defiled her by bringing her into contact with those libertines. He had left her defenseless against their insults and unprotected from the assaults of men he knew to be capable of anything. He had told her to forget she was married and have a good time; he had refused her appeal for protection. She asked herself dazedly what sort of a creature he could be. Of a sudden the old life of the theater and the café seemed clean as opposed to the fetid existence behind her; even Jim, adventurer, crook, blackmailer that he was, appeared wholesome compared with men like Hayman and his brother-in-law. Although Lorelei, under ordinary circumstances, was even-tempered, her anger, once aroused, was tenacious. As she brooded over her humiliation her indignation at Bob began to take definite shape and purpose.

She reached the little apartment in the hushed hours before the dawn, and straightway began her packing. Since Bob was doubtless in a drunken stupor which would last for hours, she did not hurry.

Only once did she halt in her labors, and then only from surprise. In a bureau drawer she uncovered a bundle of letters and documents addressed to her husband, which in some way aroused her curiosity. Swallowing her qualms, she examined the contents. They proved to be, in the main, letters from Bob's mother and father urging him to break off his marriage. Those from Mr. Wharton were characteristically intolerant and dictatorial; those from Bob's mother were plaintive and infinitely sad. Both parents, she perceived, had exhausted every effort to win their son from his infatuation, both believed Lorelei to be an infamous woman bent upon his destruction, and,

judging from the typewritten reports inclosed with some of the father's letters, there was ample reason for such a belief. These reports covered Lorelei's every movement, they bared every bit of ancient scandal connected with her, they recounted salacious stage gossip as fact and falsely construed those actions which were capable of more than one interpretation. It gave the girl a peculiar sensation of unreality to see her life laid out before her eyes in so distorted a shape, and when she read the business-like biographies of herself and the members of her family she could only marvel at Bob's faith. For evidently he had not answered a single letter. Nevetherless, after preparing an early breakfast, she sent her trunks down-stairs and 'phoned for a taxi-cab.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON Tuesday afternoon a badly shaken, exceedingly frightened young man called at Campbell Pope's boarding-house.

"Good Lord, Bob! Been on another bat?" cried Pope, at sight of his caller. Wharton took a fleeting glance at himself in a mirror and nodded, noting for the first time the sacks beneath his eyes, the haggard lines from nostrils to lip-corners.

"I'm all in. Lorelei's quit me," he said, dully.

"Quit you!" Pope frowned. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I climbed the vine again and fell off. She packed up—disappeared—been gone since Saturday night, and I can't find her. Nobody seems to know where she is. I came up for air Sunday, but . . . I'm hard hit, Pope. I'm ready to quit the game if I can't find her; me for a sea-foam pillow, sure. Oh, I'm not kidding—I'll start walking from here toward Jersey. . . . God! I keep thinking that maybe *she* took the river. You see, I'm all gone." He sank into a chair, twitching and trembling in a nervous collapse.

"Better have a drink," Pope suggested; but Bob returned roughly:

"That's what broke up the sketch. I got stewed at Fennellcourt—high-hat week-end party—fast crowd, and the usual trimmings. Never again! That is, if I find my wife."

"Fennellcourt! Suppose you tell me all about it. If there's a chance that it's suicide—" Pope's reportorial

instinct brought the last word into juxtaposition with "Fennellcourt," and he saw black head-lines.

"Judge for yourself. Maybe you can help me; nobody else can." Bob recounted the story of the house-party; how he and Lorelei had met Bert Hayman; how, once in the company of his old friends, he had succumbed to his weakness, and how he had caroused most of Saturday night. He told Pope that he could remember little of Sunday's occurrences, having been plunged in an alcoholic stupor so benumbing that not until late that evening had he fully grasped the fact that Lorelei had gone. Even then he was too befuddled to act. Neither Mrs. Fennell nor her husband could give him any help, and Bert Hayman, who had been with Lorelei all Saturday evening, had no explanation to give of her departure. Bob remembered in passing that Bert had been confined to his room all day Sunday as the result of a fall or an accident of some sort. Monday morning, while still suffering from the effects of his spree, Bob had returned to the city to find his home deserted, and for twenty-four sleepless hours now he had been hunting for his wife. He had called up Lorelei's family, but they could give him no clue; nor could he find trace of her in any other quarter. So, as a last resort before calling in the police, he had come to Pope. When he had finished his somewhat muddled tale he stared at the critic with a look of dumb appeal.

Campbell began in a matter-of-fact, positive tone. "She's altogether too healthy to think of suicide; rest easy on that score. You're weak enough emotionally to do such a thing, but not she. Besides, why should she? I can't imagine that any act of yours could very deeply offend anybody, even your wife. However—" He studied briefly. "Have you been to see Miss Demorest?"

"Sure! Adorée hasn't seen her."

"Possibly!" Pope eyed his caller speculatively. "So you decided to jimmy her into society, eh! Who was at

the party? Oh, Lord!" he exclaimed, as Bob muttered over the list of names. "How did she compare with those sacred cows?"

"Oh, great! The men went crazy over her—I knew they would."

"But how did the women treat her?"

"Why, all right. I didn't notice anything."

"What? No, of course you didn't. You were probably too drunk to notice much." Bob flushed. "You introduced her to the fastest people in New York, then left her entirely to her own resources while you went away and made an ass of yourself. Well, something must have happened to alarm her, and, since you were too maudlin to be of any assistance, she evidently took the bit in her teeth. I can't blame her. For Heaven's sake, why did you set her in with *that* crowd? If you wanted to take her slumming, why didn't you hire a guide and go into the red-light district?"

Bob defended himself listlessly. "That's the only crowd I know; it's the only set that's open to a Pittsburg furnace-man's son. Those people aren't so bad; I guess they're no worse than the rest. If a person goes looking for nastiness he can find it nearly anywhere. I never did—and I never saw anything very scandalous around that bunch."

"One's observations are never very keen when they're made through the bottom of a glass," observed Pope.

Bob exploded irritably. "All right, Lieutenant! Play 'Jerusalem' on the cornet while I pass the tambourine. Damn the post-mortems! I want my wife, not a 'Ballington Booth' on the terrors of intemperance. I've got to have her, too. I—can't last this way. She's the only person who can straighten me up. . . . I was doing fine. Had a job . . . I'll go straight to hell again if I don't find her." There was no doubt of the man's sincerity; his mental and his physical condition were obvious.

Pope did his best to repair the wreckage in some degree, and, having quieted the sufferer, he set out for Miss Demorest's home.

Adorée, clad in a slightly soiled negligée, answered his ring, then, recognizing him, blocked the door hastily, exposing a face overcast with defiance and contempt.

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "Aha!" and Pope's sensitive ego recoiled before the fierce challenge of her tone. Physically the caller stood his ground, but inwardly he retreated in disorder. Adorée never failed to affect him uncomfortably; for he was conscious of having wronged her, and he could in no way reconcile her public reputation with his personal impressions of her. His inability to keep her notorious character constantly in mind made him angry with himself; and, further, she offended him by assuming bewilderingly different aspects every time they met. Invariably she greeted him with contumely; invariably he arose to the challenge and overcame her attack; invariably she fought him on every subject. And yet all the time he vaguely suspected that they were really in complete accord and growing to like each other.

"I've come to see Lorelei," he explained, affably.

"Oh, you're looking for scandal, eh?" breathed Miss Demorest. "Well, you won't get it, body-snatcher!"

Pope bowed gravely. "You overwhelm me with your courtesy," he said. "I do not represent the press to-day. I'm here as a friend. Bob's nearly dead."

"Serves him right. I suppose you've left another reporter to take down his dying words for the evening paper."

"Don't be silly. I want to see—"

"She's not here."

"Then I'd like to talk with you." The door opened slightly, and Pope smiled, whereupon the opening narrowed. "No. You can't come in. I've just cleaned house."

In desperation the man exclaimed: "I won't sit down, but I must talk to you. Really, I must, about—ducks, if nothing else."

"Ducks!" Adorée's expression altered.

"Let's be sensible. I want you to like me." Pope tried to appear amiable, but the effort resulted in a painful smirk.

"Huh!"

"We like the same things—let's be friends. You needn't tell me anything about Lorelei, but I do want your advice about Bob."

"I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't come in. You'll probably wriggle in somehow, even if you have to steal a key. If you don't know the truth you'll probably make up something about Lorelei, as you did about me—Buzzard!" Pope began to perspire, as he always did when deeply embarrassed. But the door swung wide, and he entered with a strained, unnatural smile upon his face.

"You see I'm not concealing her anywhere," Miss Demorest challenged.

"Of course not. We never suspected you, but we're afraid something has happened to her."

"Something has."

"What?"

Adorée tossed her head. "You're paid to find out."

"See here, I'm not always a newspaper man. Try and forget that side of me for once. Bob will drink himself to death, or do something equally foolish, if Lorelei doesn't come back. He's repentant. He's in a terrible condition. I really believe she can straighten him out if she'll have patience, and you know he's too good a man to lose. He thinks she left him because he got drunk, but I'm sure there must have been some other reason."

"I should say there was! You want scandal? I'll give you some." Adorée's eyes were flashing now. "If he's going to drown himself he ought to realize what he

did and think it over when he comes up for the third time. Have you any idea what that girl went through out there on Long Island? Listen." She plumped herself down beside Pope and began to talk swiftly with an intensity of indignation that made her forgetful of her dishabille. She was animated; she had an expressive, impulsive manner of using her hands when interested, and now she gesticulated violently. She also squirmed, bounced, hitched, flounced; she seized Pope's arm, she emphasized her points from time to time by a shake or by a dig of her white fingers. When she had finished her story her shocked blue eyes interrogated his, and the critic roused himself with an effort. He found that he was tightly holding the fingers of her right hand, but dropped them and cleared his throat.

"You say she's staying here with you?"

"I didn't say so, but she is."

"Doesn't she care for Bob any more?"

"Y-yes! At first she was furious, but we've talked a good deal, and I think she does care—away down underneath. She may not know it herself, but she does, especially now that—"

"What?" asked Pope, as Adorée hesitated and flushed.

"Nothing! But she won't go back. She declares she won't spoil her whole life for a drunken wretch like him, and she's quite right, of course."

"She's quite wrong, of course! Bob's done pretty well for a man of his type, and he's had a hard lesson. After all, it's a woman's part to sacrifice—she's not happy unless she gives more than she gets. You and I must bring them together."

"How?"

Pope had been thinking while he talked, and now he sketched his plan eagerly.

"You are perfectly detestable and horrid," she told him when he had finished, "but I suppose there must

be some good in you. Don't think you argued me into this, however, for you didn't. There's an altogether different reason why I want those two to make up." She laid her hand upon his arm again, and when Pope caught her meaning his sallow cheeks were glowing and his eyes as bright as hers.

"Gee! You're all right!" said he. "I'll call for you after the show."

Adorée's smile was uncertain as she demurred. "Perhaps you'd better meet me here. What will people say?" But Pope was insistent.

We are accustomed to resent the efforts of our friends to arrange our affairs for us, and we pray for deliverance from their mistakes, yet without their assistance we would often make miserable failures of our lives. So it was in the case of Bob and Lorelei.

Burning with shame and resentment, she had been strong in her determination to end their marriage, and this frame of mind had continued for some time; but as her anger cooled she dimly understood that a change had come over her and that she no longer looked upon the world with the eyes of a girl. Simultaneously there came another discovery which completely upset all her calculations and to which she had not fully adjusted herself even up to the time of the critic's visit to Adorée. One great mystery she had solved; another, the deepest mystery of a woman's life, had begun to unfold, and as yet she could scarcely give it credence.

She was surprised when Adorée brought Campbell Pope home with her that night, and she was somewhat diverted by the complete change in their mutual attitude. Now that the first clash was over, now that they had expressed their dislike and disapproval of each other, they no longer quarreled. Pope was frankly admiring, and Adorée could not conceal her awe at Campbell's

literary and musical ability. She explained to Lorelei: "I asked him in for the sake of the piano. I knew you were blue, and there's nothing so cheering as music."

But when Pope finally got around to play the result was not altogether happy. Adorée, to be sure, seemed delighted, but Lorelei felt herself gripped by a greater loneliness than usual. Pope's music was far from lively, and he had cunningly chosen the hour when it exerts its greatest emotional appeal. He was artist enough, moreover, to work his effects with certainty.

Lorelei sought relief at length in the seclusion of Adorée's rear room, and there in the midst of a "crying spell" Bob found her.

Her first quick resentment at the deception practised upon her melted at sight of him, for he had suffered, and he was evidently suffering now. He was not the Bob she had known, but chastened, repentant, speechless with a tremulous delight at seeing her again. In the next room Campbell played on, smoothing the way for a reconciliation.

Lorelei found herself in her husband's arms, listening dazedly to his passionate protestations and his earnest self-denunciation. Bob had received the fright of his life, his lesson had been seared into him, and he lost no time in telling his wife about it.

At last Lorelei laid her fingers upon his lips, her eyes misty and luminous with the light of a new and wondrous certainty.

"Wait! Let me speak," she said. "I've done a lifetime of thinking in these few days. I'm not sorry that I left you, for it has enabled me to see clearly. But I'll never leave you again, Bob, no matter what you do; I can't—"

He crushed her to him, then held her away at the hint of something unsaid. "You mean you've begun to love me?" he inquired, gladly.

"Perhaps. I don't know. *Something* has changed—tremendously." Under his bewildered gaze the blood rose, warming her cheeks; her eyes swam, but not with tears; her bosom was tremulous with the knowledge that clamored for freedom, and yet refused to come.

"Don't you understand, stupid?" she said, seeing him still mystified. She hid her face, then whispered in his ear, whereupon he fell to trembling, and the fervor of his embrace relaxed. He held her gently, tenderly, as if he suddenly found her to be a fragile thing.

"My dear!—my—*dear!*" And then he too hid his face as if blinded by a pitiless light. When he raised it tears glistened on his lashes and a happiness that was like pain pierced him. "Oh! If I had only known—" he choked. "Kid, what a fool I've been, never to think that this might come! I—can't believe it."

"It's true," she smiled, and her cheeks were still dyed with that virginal flush. "Perhaps that's why I've changed toward you—something *has* happened, Bob, and you mustn't leave me now. I couldn't bear to do without you."

"*You* may forgive me," he cried, "but I'll never forgive myself. To think that I should learn of this right now—after what I did. Well, I'm through making new promises; I'm going to keep some of the old ones."

"I think it's about time we both came to earth."

"No need for you—you're the sensible one. If I can't straighten up on my own account and on yours, surely I can and will for—this."

An hour later Adorée tiptoed back to the piano after a surreptitious peek into the back room, whence nothing but the faintest murmurs issued. Her face was radiant.

"You've played some high-priced divorce lawyer out of a good case, Mr. Cricket," she beamed on Campbell. "She's in his lap." Pope's rippling fingers paused, his hands dropped, and he sighed.

"I could have set them quarreling just as well, but the rôle of cupid suits me to-night." His shoulders drooped wearily; the feverish brightness of his eyes and the pallor of his thin face indicated that he had indeed spent all his nervous force.

"Cupid in a sweater!" Adorée exclaimed. "Well, I believe it, for your playing made me positively mushy. I've been hugging a sofa-cushion and dreaming of heroes for ever so long. Why, at this moment I'd marry the janitor."

With the eager shyness of a boy he inquired: "Do you really like to hear me play? Can I come and play for you again?"

"Not without a chaperon," she told him, positively; "wool tickles my cheek."

Pope rose hastily and in some embarrassment. He could write about love with a cynic's pen, but he could not bear to talk about it even in a joking way. He eyed the speaker with the frightened fascination of a charmed rabbit, until she laughed in mischievous enjoyment of his perturbation.

"Oh, never fear! It will take more than music to make me forget what you are. Say!" She yawned, doubled up her little fists, and stretched. "Won't you play something to make those lovers go home, so I can go to bed?"

He shook his head. "Not until we go to the nearest café and have a bite to eat."

"There are no cafés open at this hour."

In spite of her protestations that she was not hungry he bore her away with him, bareheaded as she was, and in the next block they found an unsuspected little place called the "Chauffeurs' Lunch," where a man was busy making sandwiches of the whitest bread and the most delicious-smelling Hamburger for a hungry cabby with a battered hat. And there they each ate a bowl of crackers

and milk with a baked apple, using the arms of their chairs for tables. Pope's bill was forty cents, and, strangely enough, not even when he paid it did he remember that this was the woman for whose company at supper other men paid five hundred dollars.

CHAPTER XXV

BOB'S work as a salesman continued to be so effective that Kurtz finally offered him a salaried position. But instead of accepting, Bob made a counter-proposition that caused the little man to gasp. Briefly, it was to extend the scope of the present business by laying in a stock of extravagant, high-priced shirt and necktie materials, with Bob as partner in the new venture. Kurtz protested that he was not a haberdasher, but he was constrained to admit that Bob had the right idea of smart business, and after some discussion accepted his employee's nonchalant offer to go halves on the new venture and share in its profits. The fact that Bob had no money with which to carry through his part of the deal troubled that youth not in the least—Kurtz's credit was ample. Bob's theory of securing the Fifth Avenue trade was to double existing prices, and if this did not bring the business, to double them a second time; and this theory was correct, as he demonstrated when the new department was organized.

But despite the excellent income he now began to make there was never anything left in the Wharton bank-account, for Bob moved his wife to a more pretentious apartment on Riverside Drive and managed to increase their expenses so as to balance his earnings very nicely. It was quite a feat to adjust a fixed outlay to a varying income so that nothing whatever should remain, and he considered it a strong proof of his capacities that he succeeded.

By Christmas the haberdashery venture had shown such a profit that he began to pile up a small bank-account in spite of himself; so he bought an automobile, which served to eat up any monthly profits and guarantee a deficit under the most favorable circumstances. Being thus relieved of financial uncertainty, he laid plans to wrest from Kurtz a full partnership in the tailoring business itself.

The Whartons' new home was charming, and Bob provided his wife with every luxury. Lorelei did not regret that she was prevented from going out as much as formerly—her experience at Fennellcourt had cured her of any desire to get into her husband's social set—and unconsciously she and Bob began to develop a real home life.

As time went on and evidences of prosperity showed themselves Lorelei's family forgot some of their dislike of Bob and became more companionable. Strangely enough, too, their cost of living increased in proportion to their friendliness; but Bob never questioned any amount they asked him for, and he swelled their allowance with characteristic prodigality.

Lorelei was proud of him, as she had reason to be, but she had occasion for sorrow as well. His generosity was really big, his pagan joyousness banished shadows, but he was intensely human in his failings, and in spite of his determination to stop drinking, in spite of all his earnest promises, the old appetite periodically betrayed him. For a month, for two months at a time, he would manfully fight his desires, then without excuse, without cause, just when he was boasting loudest of his victory, he would fall. And yet drinking did not brutalize him as it does most men; he never became disgusting; liquor intoxicated him, but less in body than in spirit. His repentance followed promptly, his chagrin was intense, and his fear of Lorelei almost ludicrous. But the girl

had acquired a wider charity, a gentler patience; she grieved, she tried to help him, and his frailty endeared him to her. Love had been slow to awaken; in fact, she had not been definitely aware of its birth; but suddenly she had found it flowering in her soul, and now it flourished the more as that other interest intensified and began to dominate her.

Bob responded to all her efforts save one: she could not make him serious. On the whole, however, they were more happy than they had ever been.

One day, during the slack holiday season, Hannibal Wharton appeared at the Kurtz establishment. He appraised the elaborate surroundings with a hostile eye and stared at his son impassively.

"So! You're a seamstress now," he began, and Bob grinned. "Merkle told me you repaid his loan and had an automobile."

"That's true."

"Second-hand car?"

"No."

"How much do you owe?"

"Nothing, except for stock."

"Stock! What do you mean?"

"Kurtz and I are partners in one end of this business."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Mr. Wharton. Then he inquired, curiously, "Do you like this work?"

"It's not what I prefer, still there is a margin of profit."

"Huh! I should think so, at ninety dollars a suit. Well, this town is full of fools."

Bob agreed. "But we dress 'em better than hey do in Pittsburg."

After a moment's consideration Hannibal said slowly: "Mother's at the Waldorf; she wants to see you. You've just about broken her heart, Bob."

"We're not going out much, but perhaps we could call on her—"

"'We'! I said she wants to see *you*."

"And not my wife?"

"Certainly not. Neither do I. You don't seem to understand—"

Bob answered smoothly: "Certainly I understand; you think ninety dollars is too much for a suit. Perhaps I can show you something in scarfs of an exclusive design?"

"Don't be funny!" growled his father.

"Really, dad, you'd better go. That suit of yours is a sight. Somebody may think we made it for you."

Mr. Wharton remained silent for a moment. "The situation is impossible, and anybody but you would see it. We can't accept that woman, and we won't. She's notorious."

"No more so than I—or you, for that matter."

"She's a grafter. She'd quit you if I paid her enough."

"How do you know?"

"Her mother has been to see me half a dozen times. I've offered to pay her anything within reason, but they're holding out for something big. You come back, Bob. Let her go back to her own people."

"And what's to become of the other one?" Bob was smiling faintly.

"The other one? What do you mean?"

"I mean there will be three in the family soon, dad; you're going to be a grandfather."

The effect of this announcement was unexpected. Hannibal Wharton was momentarily stricken dumb, for once he was utterly at a loss. Then, instead of raising his voice, he spoke with a sharp, stuttering incisiveness:

"So that's her game, eh? I suppose she thinks she'll breed her way into the family. Well, she won't. It won't work. I was willing to compromise before—so long as there was no tangible bond between that family and mine—but they've got their blood mixed with mine; they've got a fingerhold in spite of hell, and I suppose

they'll hold on. But I won't acknowledge a grandchild with scum like that in its veins. Good God! Now listen—you." Wharton's jaw was outthrust, his gaze hard and unwavering. "No child tainted with that blood will share in one penny of my money, now or at any other time. Understand?"

"Perfectly." Bob's color had receded, but in no other way did he show his struggle for self-mastery. "My wife isn't having a baby to spite you, and if it ever needs a grandfather we'll adopt one."

"They've pulled you down into the mud; now they've tied you there. Heredity's stronger than you or I; watch your child grow up, and watch its mother's blood tell. Then remember that I tried to free you before it was too late. Well, I'm through. This settles me. Good-by, and God help you with that rotten gang." Hannibal Wharton turned and strode out of the room shaking his head and mumbling.

Jimmy Knight had fallen upon evil times. A combination of circumstances had seriously affected his mode of making a living, and that of his friends. To outward appearances the frequenters of Tony the Barber's place were as thrifty as usual, but in the pinochle-room at the rear there was gloom. Reason for these hard times lay in an upheaval of public sentiment that had galvanized the Police Department into one of its periodic spasms of activity, and the cause ran back to a sordid quarrel between two factions of the Tenderloin. At about the time when Jimmy came to New York the contention had become too bitter for the underworld to hold, and echoes of it had begun to leak out; later it culminated in the murder of the leader of one clique. Murders, it is true, are not uncommon in New York, but this one was staged in the glare of Broadway, and with a bold defiance of the law that aroused popular indignation. There followed a

chain of fortuitous happenings that issued in the capture of the murderers, in a wide-spread exposure of social conditions, and in a great outburst of public indignation against a police system that allowed such abuses to exist.

Of course there came a loud protest from the guardians of the law, a frantic waving of spotless banners, and a prating of virtue; but the popular will has a way of obtaining its desires regardless of red tape, trickery, or politics, and in this case it demanded a reorganization of the department and got it.

Discipline suddenly strengthened, and as a result gambling almost ceased, wire-tapping languished, organized blackmail was conducted under cover: only crime in its crudest forms continued as usual; and it followed therefore that Jimmy Knight was not prosperous. Had it not been for his share in Bob's generosity he would have been forced to the distressing necessity of asking for employment—a thing to curdle his blood! It was characteristic of young Knight that he did not scruple to accept charity from the man he hated, although he cherished the memory of that public beating at Bob's hands and the humiliation of it gnawed him like a cancer.

More than once lately Jim had been tempted to turn his knowledge of the Hammon "suicide" into cash, but he could think of no safe and certain means of doing so until one day Max Melcher dropped a bit of intelligence that promised to open a way.

"Who do you suppose I just heard from?" Max inquired, one raw afternoon in March, when he had found Jim in their usual haunt. "Lilas Lynn."

Jim made no attempt to conceal his surprise and interest. "Where is she?"

"She wrote from Liverpool, asking for money. Can you beat that?"

"Money? Why, she had a satchel full. What's become of it?"

Melcher shrugged. "She's taken the jumps—English Derby, Paris race-meet, Monte Carlo—"

"Huh! She fished all the sucker-holes along the route, eh? Of course you cabled her a few C's?" Jim snickered.

"Do I look as if I had? She's sick, got a cough, and says it's the 'con.' She wants to come home."

Jim started. "Say, that's no hospital bark of hers; it's nothing but the coke." After a moment he asked casually, "Where's she stopping?"

"Liverpool."

"What's her address? I'll drop her a line to cheer her up."

"She wrote from the Hotel—" Melcher checked himself and shot a questioning look at his friend. "Why this sudden charity?"

Jim's gaze was bland, his tone one of wounded innocence. "Can't a guy offer to cheer—"

"You're not in the business of cheering sick dames," Melcher said, sharply. Then, after a pause, "You never came through with me, Jim. There was something phony about Lilas's get-away. She left too suddenly after the Hammon suicide, and she's been under cover now for eight months. I never got it quite right. What 're you holding out?"

Jim sparred adroitly, but without effect.

"Oh! You've got an ace buried somewhere," Melcher said. "You're a shifty guy. Of course this is a friendly game we're playing, but, just the same, I never bettered a poker hand by leaving the room. I don't even turn my head to spit when I'm sitting in with a fellow like you. Lilas has got something on her mind, and I believe I'll cable her the price of a ticket."

That was enough for Jim. He began to weaken, and at last made a clean breast of all the circumstances surrounding Jarvis Hammon's death rather than risk the result of a meeting between Max and Lilas. When he

had finished his story Melcher was leaning forward, his pink, smooth-shaven, agreeable face gravely intent.

"So that was the way of it. Wharton and Merkle—and a four-wheeler! By God! That was nervy—on Merkle's part, especially. He took a chance. And Lilas shot the old man, eh?"

"Nobody saw her do it," Jim explained. "Lorelei was in the dining-room at the time it happened, and Hammon swore he did it himself. He stood on that to the last."

"I didn't know they grew men the size of that fellow," Max mused. "After all, it's the suckers that die game. And you were going to put this over single-handed, eh?—you and Lilas, perhaps! My boy, you must learn to shoot before you go hunting. Why, there's a hundred thousand quick money in this."

"If Wharton had done the shooting or Merkle—yes."

"What's the difference who did it? Why, it's a cinch. Get this! Lilas comes home broke. She's sick, and sees the undertaker flirting with her, so she decides to spill the whole story and take the consequences—understand? It's conscience." Mr. Melcher laughed lightly at his little joke. "A sick woman's conscience is an expensive thing; it takes money to square it. Merkle won't stand, and Wharton can't, on account of his wife—your sister. He'll tap his old man, and Hannibal will loosen for the family honor. After they're dry we've got the Hammon widow to work on."

"It 'll take money to do this—protection, too."

"Well, I've got both."

"I suppose we'll split three ways."

Max pursed his lips thoughtfully. "N-no; you and Lilas are broke. I've got the money and the police. I'll take half."

Jim's acquiescence to these terms came hard, and he cursed himself as a fool for putting himself at the mercy of this man. He was still raging inwardly when Melcher

left to send a cablegram; but there was ample leisure for reflection during the week that followed, and, being possessed of some ingenuity, Jim had formulated a scheme before Lilas Lynn's arrival.

In due time she came, and Melcher saw her established at a modest hotel before making known in detail his intentions.

Lilas was little more than a wreck of what she had been. It seemed impossible that eight short months could have worked so great a change in one of her youth and strength. Ill she undoubtedly was. She was thin, her nerves had yielded to the ravages of the drug, and a queer, unhealthy pallor had blanched her skin; her eyes were big and feverish and restless. Only at such times as she was without cocaine did her mind suffer; when she had it she was unnaturally alert. Having lately felt the harsh grip of poverty, she was obsessed now by the need of money, and offered no objections to Max's schemes. Rather, she welcomed them fiercely. She and Max and Jim mapped out a course of action together; but a day or two later, when Jim thought the moment propitious, he secured her ear alone and gave voice to his resentment against Max.

As soon as Lilas understood his drift she met him more than half-way. She was vulture-like in her greed, and with a full understanding between them the two conspired to use Max only so long and so far as suited their purposes.

In spite of Bob Wharton's peculiarly mutable temperament he was not remiss in his duties toward Lorelei during the period that led up to the birth of their child. Utterly careless and improvident in his own affairs, he was naturally considerate of others and possessed a surprising depth of sympathy. Hence he met the responsibilities of his present situation with considerable credit.

One evening he was concerned to find his wife greatly agitated, and upon learning the cause his consternation matched hers. Lorelei's eyes were big and frightened as she explained: "Lilas is back. She was here to-day."

"Lilas? Good Lord! What did she want?"

"Nothing. She just came to see me. She's changed dreadfully, and talked about nothing except—that awful night. You remember? I'm nearly in hysterics."

"Now, that won't do. You pass your worries on to me. Lilas can't make trouble for us without making more for herself."

But Lorelei seemed oppressed with a premonition of trouble. "I'm frightened, Bob," she confessed. "She acted so—strangely. Suppose—oh, suppose I should have to go to jail now or—to court—"

Bob took his wife in his arms and did his best to cure her of these sick fancies; but it was no easy task to quiet her, for a million apprehensions had sprung into life with the reopening of that old horror. At last he reminded her gently:

"Remember, dear, your thoughts are like branding-irons just now; they leave their marks. We want our child to be brave and confident and steadfast, not a coward—or something worse. This is how cowards are made. How can a child inherit weakness when its mother is without fear?"

Profiting by this experience, Bob undertook to guard against another visit from Lilas. He was really worried, although he pretended to dismiss the matter as inconsequential, and his fears flared into full blaze again a few days later, when Jimmy Knight called upon him and announced cautiously:

"Say, you know Lilas is back. Well, she's gone off her nut—she's going to give herself up."

"Give herself up? How?"

"She's going to tell the truth about the Hammon affair.

She thinks she's dying. Where do we go from here if she does that?"

Bob could not conceal his alarm, which increased when his brother-in-law begged him to do something quickly to save them all from disaster. "I wouldn't come to you," Jim confessed, candidly, "if I knew what to do; for you don't like me, and I'm not crazy about you. But we've got to stand together on account of Lorelei—not that I'd enjoy a call on the district attorney at any time."

Agreeing that there was no time to waste, the two men hastened to Lilas's hotel, only to receive a greeting that was far from auspicious. When they had adroitly brought the conversation around to the point at issue Lilas explained:

"Yes, the doctors have ticketed me. They've shown me the gate." She coughed hollowly and laid her hand on her chest. "Oh, it's the white bug! That closes the show for me." She appeared verv ill, and it did not occur to Bob to doubt her.

Jim began briskly: "Why, that's nothing, Lilas! Arizona is the place for you."

"Arizona is a long jump from Broadway."

"I'll help you if you need help," Bob hastened to offer.

Lilas flashed him a grateful glance from eyes that were doubly large and dark against her pallor. "You're a prince with your money, but—it's too late."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, they'd get me sooner or later. I may as well face the music."

"Do you mean slow music? Do you mean the bugs will get you?" Jim inquired.

"No. I mean I'd have to take it on the dodge if I went, and what's the use of that? I've talked too much." With a sudden flash of feeling she cried: "I've been through hell for eight months, and I'm tired out. I came home broke, sick, thinking of that night when—you

know! I seem to see *his* face everywhere. It bothers me at night. I used to dream of my father and a stream of molten steel. Well, the dreams are getting worse, only now I see Jarvis's face in place of my father's, and I tell you I can't stand it; I can't stand these dreams, and that face of his looking at me all the time. So I'm going to give myself up, have it over with, and do my penalty. Maybe I can sleep then. If my lungs hold out, all right; if they don't—well, I'll sleep anyhow. You see, I can't make a living, for I can't go back on the stage. Why, I can't leave this hotel—and take my trunks."

Jimmy Knight broke out nervously, "That penalty talk is all right for you, Lilas, but think about the rest of us."

"Yes; Lorelei, for instance," Bob added. "She isn't strong. You mustn't think of doing this thing."

"I know," Miss Lynn nodded. "I'm sorry, but—"

"I'll furnish all the money you want." She looked her gratitude again. "You must buck up and try to get well."

For some time the two men jointly attempted to argue Lilas out of her black despondency, and when they left it was with a hard-won promise that she would do nothing definite at once.

Outside the room Jim heaved a sigh of relief. "Whew! I could feel the knot under my ear, but—glory to God, it slipped! Just the same, I'm going to buy some oakum and make a false beard in case she flops."

In this way the trap was set and baited so skilfully that the victim was without suspicion. That evening Lilas, Jim, and Max Melcher dined together in very good spirits; and, strangely enough, the girl showed an excellent appetite for one so troubled in soul.

Wharton was as good as his word. Not only did he put Lilas in funds, but he exerted his every power of persuasion to rouse her from her despondency and reawaken a healthy

desire for life. It transpired that she had assumed some outrageous obligations, and, moreover, had hired a number of expensive lung specialists, for whom she asked him to settle; nevertheless he met her demands and was encouraged when she began to purchase a new wardrobe. Although he considered himself a spendthrift, her reckless disregard of money gave him a jolt, but he was working to gain time, and his relief on Lorelei's account deadened all other feelings.

Before long he had advanced several thousand dollars to the girl, and still her desire for martyrdom had not entirely vanished. Realizing that the mere presence of one so temperamentally hysterical as she was a constant menace, he insisted upon her going South, and in order to provide handsomely for her comfort he borrowed from his friends. He was aghast when he finally reckoned up the amount he had spent upon her.

There followed a short interval of relief, during which Lilas pretended to be making ready, then upon the very eve of her departure she sent for him in much haste and awoke him rudely from his trance.

She began by saying that his kindness and liberality had aroused in her a desire to live and to begin anew, if not for her own, then for his and Lorelei's sakes, but that she was in terrible trouble. Her punishment had sought her out after all.

It was a long time before Bob could make head or tail out of what she told him, but eventually he learned that in the hour of her deepest dejection she had confided her secret to others, and the result of this confidence had now arisen to thwart all their plans.

With a dizzy feeling of insecurity Bob asked, "Who did you tell?"

"Melcher. He sent me money to come home with, and he seemed to be my only friend."

"Friend! I thought you and he were enemies."

"Oh, he doesn't love me and he doesn't hate me," Lilas explained. "He seemed sorry for me, and I was grateful for any sympathy, no matter where it came from. You see, I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't realize my mistake until it was too late."

"Melcher of all people!" Bob groaned.

"Wait—that's not all. You see, I wanted to go clean, and yet I was afraid of the police, so Max advised me to hire a lawyer who'd get me off light. Well, I did."

"Goldberg, I suppose." Bob breathed a malediction as Lilas nodded. "Why didn't you hire a hall or book yourself through the Lyceum Bureau?"

"Don't be hard on me." Lilas had foresworn the stage, but she did a creditable bit of emotional acting. "A frantic woman will do almost anything."

"Well, present your bill in full. What's the next misfortune?"

"I had no idea men could be so vile. Yesterday I told Max of the change in my plans; that you've made life possible to me and showed me that I couldn't go through without consequences to others. He—" She dropped her hands in a gesture of resignation. "What's the use? You know the kind of man he is."

"Go on."

Lilas began to weep silently, rocking her body to and fro. "It's just my luck—when I had another chance, too! I don't care for my own sake, but I do love—Lorelei; and you've certainly been a prince, Bob."

"Good Lord! Max can't insist on your giving yourself up. Why, that's absurd!"

"Oh, he doesn't care what becomes of me. It's—it's—" Lilas broke out in a passion: "I never thought I was putting you in his power, and—and Lorelei, too—and Jim, and Mr. Merkle. Of course you won't believe that, but I can't help what you think. I wouldn't blame you for—killing me. Why, I'd go to the chair to keep you

people clear, but—those are the facts. Now you've got it all."

"Max sees money in sight, I presume?"

"That's all he sees. Money? My God! He's mad. Why he doesn't talk figures that I understand. It's nothing but blackmail, Bob, and you mustn't stand for it. He's a queer man—he helped me when I was broke; now he'd hitch me to a bull and ticket me up the river, to get that money. Why, he'd strap the coppers on my feet and turn on the juice with his own hand rather than lose this chance."

As her flow of speech died down to apologetic murmurs Bob said gravely: "I never thought Merkle and I could cover a thing like Hammon's death, but, after all, they can't do much to us."

"It's mighty kind of you to say so. I'll stand whatever comes to me; I was thinking more of Lorelei—she's in no condition—"

Bob uttered an exclamation. "You're right! We've got to gain time. After the baby's born it won't matter so much."

"Max is no fool; he won't wait. Besides, Goldberg's been to see Inspector Snell already on my account, and Snell is in the know. He's holding back warrants now for all of us. I couldn't leave town if I wanted to."

The numbing force of the calamity coming at this of all times fairly stupefied Bob, rendering him incapable of clear analysis or even of the suspicions his ordinary intelligence would have prompted.

"Why doesn't Snell get busy?" he inquired, blankly, at which Lilas lost her patience.

"Don't you see he's in on the graft? Snell doesn't want to pinch us. He doesn't care how Jarvis died, any more than Max or Goldberg cares. They want money, *money*—coin! That's how things are run in this town, that's how the police are squared. If you don't come across they'll

try to show that it was murder instead of self-defense. Remember it was my gun that killed—that did the work—and it was found in Hammon's library."

Before Bob's arrival Lilas had prepared herself for this scene by a liberal dose of cocaine, but the strain of her acting had exhausted her strength; her brain was tiring. Accordingly she excused herself, and, once in her bathroom, prepared a fresh solution of the powder, leaving Bob the while to meditate upon his plight. When she returned her eyes were brighter and she had regained the mastery of her unruly nerves. Bob looked up with a drawn expression that almost moved her to pity.

"How much do they want?" he inquired, dully.

"Don't be a fool, Bob. You helped me; I won't see you gouged. No matter what you gave they'd frame you over again. We'd better face it."

"I *can't* face it," he cried. "Alone, I would in a minute—no court in the world would hold Merkle and me for what we did—but I can't let 'em hurt my wife and my kid. Why, Lorelei would die of fright." He choked and stammered. "They want money. How much?"

"Merkle is the man they're after."

"How much?" he insisted.

"It would take a hundred thousand to square it."

Bob gasped. "This is the worst dream I ever had."

"I told you I couldn't understand their figures. But Merkle's a millionaire. If you had ten dollars you'd give one to square a copper, wouldn't you? Well, your name's Wharton, and his is Merkle. There's fifty million dollars behind those two names, and Max knows it. If I had the price I'd pay it to save you people who helped me when I needed help, but—what have I got? I told Max he could go to hell, and you'd better tell him the same thing. Now—what do you want me to do?"

Bob's lips were white. "Stand pat and wait until I—

rob a bank. I've got to buy three weeks' time, no matter what it costs."

When he had gone Lilas 'phoned first to Melcher and reported progress; then she called up Jim. The latter appeared in person that evening, and the two sat until late talking guardedly.

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE was but one man to whom Bob dared appeal in this unhappy situation, and that man was John Merkle. The banker listened gravely to Bob's recital, then inquired with apparent irrelevance:

"You are mighty fond of Lorelei, aren't you?"

"Why, of course."

Merkle nodded reflectively. "I was mistaken in you," he admitted. "I didn't think the marriage would last. I suppose you are immensely pleased with yourself—reformed character, aren't you?" His face expressed a cynical inquiry.

"Pleased with myself? Not much! Lorelei reformed me. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Good! I wondered if you took all the credit to yourself. Lorelei *did* do it, and I don't intend to let you forget the fact. Now, about this Lynn woman—you have been stung, Bob."

"You think so? I wonder—"

"Don't be a fool!"

"You think it is a frame-up?"

"What else could it be? Think!"

Bob exploded in desperation: "I can't think, with my wife in this condition. However, if you're right I'm going to see Max Melcher and tell him about Lorelei. Then I'm going to make him wait."

"Make him? *Make him?*"

"Yes, I'm going to *make* him wait." Bob's lips were white; he raised his eyes slowly, and Merkle saw that they were heavy with resentment.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the latter. "Where is your common sense? Never use violence; it is antiquated and expensive. Suppose you let me handle this thing in my own way."

"Have you any plan?"

"I'm never without one. They're not all good plans, understand; some are very bad, in fact. But, you see, I have been expecting something like this for a long time. I saw blackmail in your brother-in-law's face the night Jarvis Hammon was killed. I don't sleep much, so I have time to think, and, being dyspeptic, I'm always suspicious. Dyspepsia has spared me many disappointments; people are never any worse than I believe them to be."

"You don't believe Jim is in this, too? Why, he is Lorelei's brother!"

"What possible difference can that make to a man of his stamp?" the banker demanded, querulously. "Don't you know your own brother-in-law? To a conscienceless rogue it's no more unnatural to conspire against one's relatives than against total strangers. It is the logical thing to do. It is nature's method of protecting the stranger, and it's one of the penalties for having relatives. You are young and sentimental, so I sha'n't tell you what my plan is. Meanwhile, though, you may tell Lilas that you have acquainted me with the situation and that I am willing to spend a lot of money to avoid publicity."

"Do you mean you are willing to pay her?"

Merkle smiled sourly. "Let her put her own construction on the statement."

Beyond this Merkle would give Bob little satisfaction, but later in the day, after a short telephone conversation, he called at one of the up-town political clubs and inquired for Senator Sabin. The Senator was expecting him, and Merkle lost no time in explaining his trouble.

Nature had endowed Sabin with the faculty of hearing

more than people said and saying less than people heard. He sat now with a graven smile upon his fat, good-humored face, but with eyes that were serious and watchful. Only once did he interrupt his caller's recital, and then at the mention of Inspector Snell.

"Snell!" he exclaimed, sharply. "Are you sure?"

"So the woman says."

Sabin nodded; he carefully matched his fingers, tip to tip, and then relapsed into silence. Merkle went on with his story, feeling the while as if he were addressing an audience of two men, one a sympathetic, convivial soul, the other a baffling, sinister person behind a mask. But when Sabin finally spoke it was as neither; his voice was friendly and matter-of-fact.

"This is a bad business, John."

The banker broke out, irritably: "Now don't begin that! I have a pastor who keeps me in spiritual uncertainty, and a doctor who torments me physically, and a business that's hell in both directions. I didn't come here to swap tears; I want help."

"It may cost—"

"Of course it may. I don't expect you to square it with a bunch of double English violets, but it can be squared, and it *must* be, if only for the sake of Hammon's women folks. It won't serve any good purpose to air that old scandal."

The Senator nodded. "First we will have to eliminate the gang—clean them out." He made an expansive, eloquent gesture. "You don't object?"

"Kill 'em, if necessary," Merkle growled, vindictively.

"Very well; I'll do my best."

"Then it's done."

Merkle rose with relief, shook the Senator's limp and pudgy hand, then departed, knowing that the secret of Jarvis Hammon's death was quite as safe in Sabin's keeping as in his own. That plump, imperturbable

politician had long been one of the triumvirate that ruled the city, and Merkle knew him to be the tomb of confessions far more startling than this; he knew also that although Sabin took toll of the public in the way of all powerful political rulers he put no price on his favors.

That evening Inspector Snell occupied the same chair in which Merkle had sat, and found himself the target of Sabin's veiled stare. Snell was a bulky, forceful, unimaginative man. He was vastly impressive in his uniform, but the Senator's questions appeared to bewilder him.

"What do you mean—Melcher?" the Inspector finally inquired.

"He claims you give him protection."

The officer's face purpled. "Oh! he does, does he? Well, you'd know if I did, wouldn't you? That's how them fellows get along, by selling something they can't deliver."

"Ever take any of his money?"

"Not a cent."

"What do you know about the killing of Jarvis Hammon?"

"Hammon, the steel man? Why, he wasn't killed, was he?" Snell was plainly puzzled. "Well, well!" he confessed, when the truth had been gently eased into his mind. "That's news! I'm much obliged for the tip, Senator."

"Wait a minute. That's not the idea at all," Sabin said, quickly. "The woman acted in self-defense."

"Ha! They all do. I'm thinking about myself. These are big names—this is a big case, and it will do me a lot of good to work it out."

"It will break you," the Senator murmured, quietly. "You are getting ahead just as fast as it is possible, Snell. Cut out this grave-robbing stuff and make some real friends. Understand? You need friends of the right sort, and this is your chance."

For some time longer the two men talked guardedly. At last the Inspector rose to leave, saying: "I think I have all the details now, and I'll scatter the gang as quick as possible. I can hang something on the woman easily enough, and the boys, too, but it's different with Max. He has a drag."

"Leave Max to me. Do you need money?"

"Not from your friends, Senator," the officer disclaimed, hastily. "I'm only too glad to help out in any way I can."

To Bob Wharton the suspense of the next few days was trying in the extreme, particularly as Merkle kept declaring there was nothing to report, while Jimmy Knight betrayed an apprehension so pitiable as well-nigh to banish suspicion of his complicity in the plot. But before long there came to pass in various quarters certain events which gave Bob cause for thought. Strangely enough, these events, one and all, had some effect, either direct or indirect, upon the habitués of Tony the Barber's place. To begin with, Tony himself was summoned to headquarters and forced to spend a distressing half-hour with a harsh, ill-natured police official, as a result of which the pinochle-room at the rear of the barber-shop was closed and the door nailed up. With an unnatural show of indignation Tony warned its frequenters to stay away from his shop. Naturally he had recourse to Melcher, who promised to square the misunderstanding. But for once Melcher failed. When his efforts proved fruitless he was puzzled. So was Tony. The man upon whom Max relied for help was likewise at a loss, and finally hazarded the opinion that Tony must have made an enemy of somebody "higher up."

This chilling phenomenon was still a subject of discussion when Armistead was arrested for selling cocaine. Now Armistead's addiction to the drug was well known—in fact, he readily confessed to it—but, knowing only too

well the risks involved in its sale, he had never even contemplated such a thing. He was outraged and incredulous, but a dope-shattered derelict swore out a complaint against him, and when Armistead's room was searched, strange to relate, the police discovered a considerable amount of cocaine concealed therein. Bail was fixed at an unusually high figure even for a felony, and Max Melcher wondered vaguely as he arranged to meet it.

Misfortunes multiplied rapidly. On the very next day Young Sullivan was caught picking pockets in the Times Square Subway station and once more Max was forced to journey jailward. Sullivan's story gave his chief still more occasion for thought, for this arrest seemed plainly "a frame," being absurd upon its face. The pugilist had huge, misshapen paws that could scarcely explore his own, much less another's pockets, and his stiffened fingers could not palm a coin in the dark, yet a stranger had accused him of deftly lifting a watch. It seemed significant that two plain-clothes men should have been at Sullivan's elbow at the moment. The prize-fighter had acted according to his nature, and a fine row had resulted, in the midst of which there had dropped out of his clothes a gold watch which Sullivan violently protested he had never seen before. His imperious demand upon Max for help was resentfully couched, but Melcher dared not refuse to act as his bondsman.

Max was worried when he left the jail, and his perturbation increased when he discovered late that night that Armistead had disappeared, with the evident intention of jumping his bond. Convinced now that something must be badly out of joint, he lost no time in warning Lilas Lynn to go slow with her blackmailing enterprise. Indeed, he ordered her to drop it entirely until he had time to discover where the trouble lay.

Upon the girl this command had an unexpected effect;

for not only did it prove to her that Max had lost his pull at headquarters, but it also strengthened her determination to betray him in accordance with Jimmy Knight's suggestion. Why, indeed, should she share her gains with anybody? If Max had no right to any part of the loot what possible claim had Jim to share in it? Once Lilas's cupidity was aroused it banished even that meager ghost of honor that is supposed to prevail among thieves; and, disregarding Max's caution, she decided to take things entirely into her own hands, riding this wave of success to the finish. Accordingly she sent for Bob.

It did not take her long to see that Wharton had changed since their last interview, and accordingly she did not put herself to the trouble of acting—in fact, Bob allowed her no opportunity of doing so.

"Now don't give me that stall about Melcher," he said, in answer to her first inquiries. "I'm on."

Miss Lynn's cheeks had lost the power of changing color, but her eyes were as expressive as ever, and now as she stared at her victim they showed a certain inflexibility of purpose.

"You must have been talking to Merkle," she said, slowly.

"Exactly. He's not such a fool as I am."

"Well?" There was an insolent rising inflection in Lilas's voice. "What are you going to do about it?"

Bob had prepared himself for some denial, for some pretense of ignorance, at least, and he was taken aback at this ready acceptance of his challenge. Something malevolent in her air increased his uneasiness. The girl was as hard as flint and seemed capable of any desperate action.

"You say you love Lorelei; you pretend to be grateful to me—"

As if the mere heat of his accusation had ignited her fury Lilas interrupted him angrily: "Oh, cut out that

"YOU must have been talking to Merkle. . . . Well? . . . What are you going to do about it?"

love-and-gratitude talk! I want money, do you understand? *Money!* You think I won't dare go through with this, and so does Merkle. You, neither of you, can understand why I'll take a chance on 'the chair' just to make you pay. Well, that's because you are men, and because you are healthy and happy and have something to live for. But what have I got? I'm sick. I'm going to pieces. I'll be gone in a few years if I don't get the coin. I've always fought and I've usually been licked, but I won't be licked this time. Men like you and John Merkle licked me— Why, I was licked before I had learned to fight back, and you taught me to hate you before I had put on long dresses."

"You know that's not true!" Bob cried, sharply. "You harmed men before they ever harmed you. You hated Jarvis Hammon, and yet he did more for you than any one in all your life; Merkle helped you, too, when you needed help, and so did I. Lorelei was your friend—"

"Bah! I haven't any friends; I never had any, and I don't want any now. Nobody ever did anything for me. You and John Merkle are going to pay me for what other men have put me through. Oh, come, I'm not bluffing! You're afraid to stand the gaff, but I'm not. I'm getting old. My looks are gone. Who's going to pay me if you don't? Who—" Lilas's voice, which has risen steadily, broke now, and she shook a clenched fist in Wharton's face. He saw that she had worked herself up into one of her abrupt, reasonless rages.

"I've got you!" she keened. "I can drag you and your sick wife, and Merkle, and those Hammon women out into the light, and I'll do it, too. I can make you all squirm, so let's get down to cases. There's millions of dollars among you, millions that were squeezed out of my kind of people; now I'm going to try my hand at squeezing. If I lose—very well. But I'll holler, and

you'll have to stop my mouth or the world will hear. *You* don't dare holler."

"I'm glad you're in the open at last," Bob told her, roughly. "We'll see if Melcher is as desperate as—"

"To hell with Melcher!" screamed the girl. "He's a fool. He's scared already, but I'm not, and I'm the one to settle with, remember that." She was a-quiver now; her nerves, tortured from overstimulation, were jumping; but she felt a tremendous sense of power, together with a contemptuous disregard of consequences. "Go to Max, if you want to. Sound the alarm. Do anything you please," she mocked, "but get your pennies together or I'll bawl you out from the housetops."

There was no arguing with her, as she was drunk with the sense of her advantage, and Bob could only depart, his ears ringing unpleasantly with her threats.

As to just what effect her unrestrained spleen would have, or in which direction it might work the greatest damage, he was uncomfortably in doubt. For himself, he had no particular fears, but he dreaded terribly the effect upon his wife. It seemed to him, therefore, that the only way of gaining time was to pay Lilas enough to satisfy her. The more he thought of this the more imperative seemed the necessity, but when he ventured to submit the proposition to Merkle the banker curtly refused to entertain it.

Sick with anxiety, weak at thought of the peril to his wife's health, Bob determined to call upon Max Melcher and demand immunity upon pain of violence. Accordingly he turned his steps in the direction of the Metropolitan Club. But as he neared his destination he found a crowd gathered in front of the place; two patrol-wagons were backed up to the curb opposite the gambling-house; a line of policemen streamed in and out of the premises. Some of the officers were armed with axes and sledges,

others carried burdens that evoked jeers and taunts from the bystanders.

Doubting the evidence of his own eyes, Bob elbowed his way closer. It was true! The Metropolitan Club, the oldest, the safest, the best-protected palace of chance in the city, was the object of a daylight raid. Its sacred doors had been battered in, and the fragments of furniture that came out gave evidence that the raiders had used their destructive weapons with unusual violence. Racks of multi-colored ivory chips, faro-layouts, splintered remains of expensive roulette, crap, and poker tables of mahogany and rosewood were flung carelessly into the waiting wagons and driven away. Bob Wharton's amazement was shared by the onlookers, for nothing like this had even been known in the Tenderloin.

Bob was not a dull young man. In time a light broke through his troubled mind, and he returned to Broadway, lost in thought. Evidently Merkle's plan was working.

CHAPTER XXVII

ADVENTURES of moment had also fallen to the lot of Jimmy Knight on this day. Lacking the hospitality of Tony's back room, Jim had of late taken up loafing-quarters in a Seventh Avenue saloon, frequented by a coterie of parasitic young men who subsisted on the crowds which passed daily in and out of the Pennsylvania Station. On the very afternoon of the Melcher raid Jim was sitting at a table with one of these fellows, lending a willing ear to tales of easy money, when he felt a touch upon his shoulder and, looking up, found a plain-clothes man standing over him. The stranger wore no visible badge of authority, but Jim knew him instantly for what he was. In the background another person with the same indefinable stamp of the bull watched proceedings with an expressionless face.

Now Jim had the heart of a rabbit, and, being forever busy in "framing" some one, his first suspicion was that he himself was being framed. This suspicion proved all too correct. Never in his worst dreams had he experienced anything so distressing as what followed his arrest, for it seemed as if these officers cherished a personal grudge against him. They seemed prejudiced for no reason whatever, and they made their aversion patent in several professionally effective ways. Jim found his arms twisted backward and upward until his bones cracked and his joints came loose; with wrists pinioned behind his shoulder-blades and walking on his toes he was propelled into the street. Since this was his first arrest,

he did not know enough to go quietly, and when one of his captors released his grip he tried to wrench himself loose. Cossacks could not mistreat a prisoner more brutally than these policemen mistreated poor, cringing, spineless Jimmy Knight. He reached the station-house more dead than alive, and then when he saw a loaded revolver removed from his own pocket he utterly collapsed. Weeping like a woman, he was led to a cell and left to meditate upon the inconsistencies and injustices of the Sullivan law.

As the hours crept by and his efforts to obtain assistance proved unavailing he began to understand something of Young Sullivan's and Armistead's feelings. Then light came to him; he learned of the disaster to the Metropolitan Club and immediately lost faith in Melcher's ability to help him, with the result that when he was finally led to Inspector Snell's office for the third degree he "squealed" promptly. In his panic to save himself he volunteered even more of his private history than the Inspector desired to hear, and was only too willing to make known all of the facts of the Hammon case. Nor did he withhold the truth about the present attempt at blackmailing Bob Wharton and Merkle; the first question along this line served to unlock his lips, and he whiningly laid bare the entire conspiracy. It seemed, however, that his earnest desire to help the law was scarcely appreciated, for even after he had blindly affixed his signature to the documents which Inspector Snell placed before him he was led back to his cell.

Rules were far from strict at Lilas Lynn's hotel. The employees were not overcourteous at any time, and, although in theory callers announced themselves by telephone before going up-stairs, this was a custom generally honored in the breach. No question, therefore, was raised when a heavily built, capable-looking man, with

large hands and feet, inquired for Miss Lynn's room-number and stepped into the elevator without declaring his business.

Lilas herself opened the door at his knock, but showed some reluctance at admitting him until he murmured the magic word "Headquarters," whereupon she fell back with a look of startled inquiry in her eyes. The stranger did not trouble to remove his hat; after a swift inventory of the room he announced:

"The Inspector sent me to see you."

"What Inspector?"

"Snell."

"Yes?" Lilas's voice was badly controlled, for there was something disturbing about this man's behavior.

"Your orders is to leave town. Be out and away at eight o'clock; that's four hours. Understand?"

"You must be crazy," Lilas cried, with a show of spirit. "What have I done? Who do you think I am? Inspector Snell, eh? I don't know him, and he doesn't know me."

"I guess he knows you, all right. Eight bells, sister. I'll be back then."

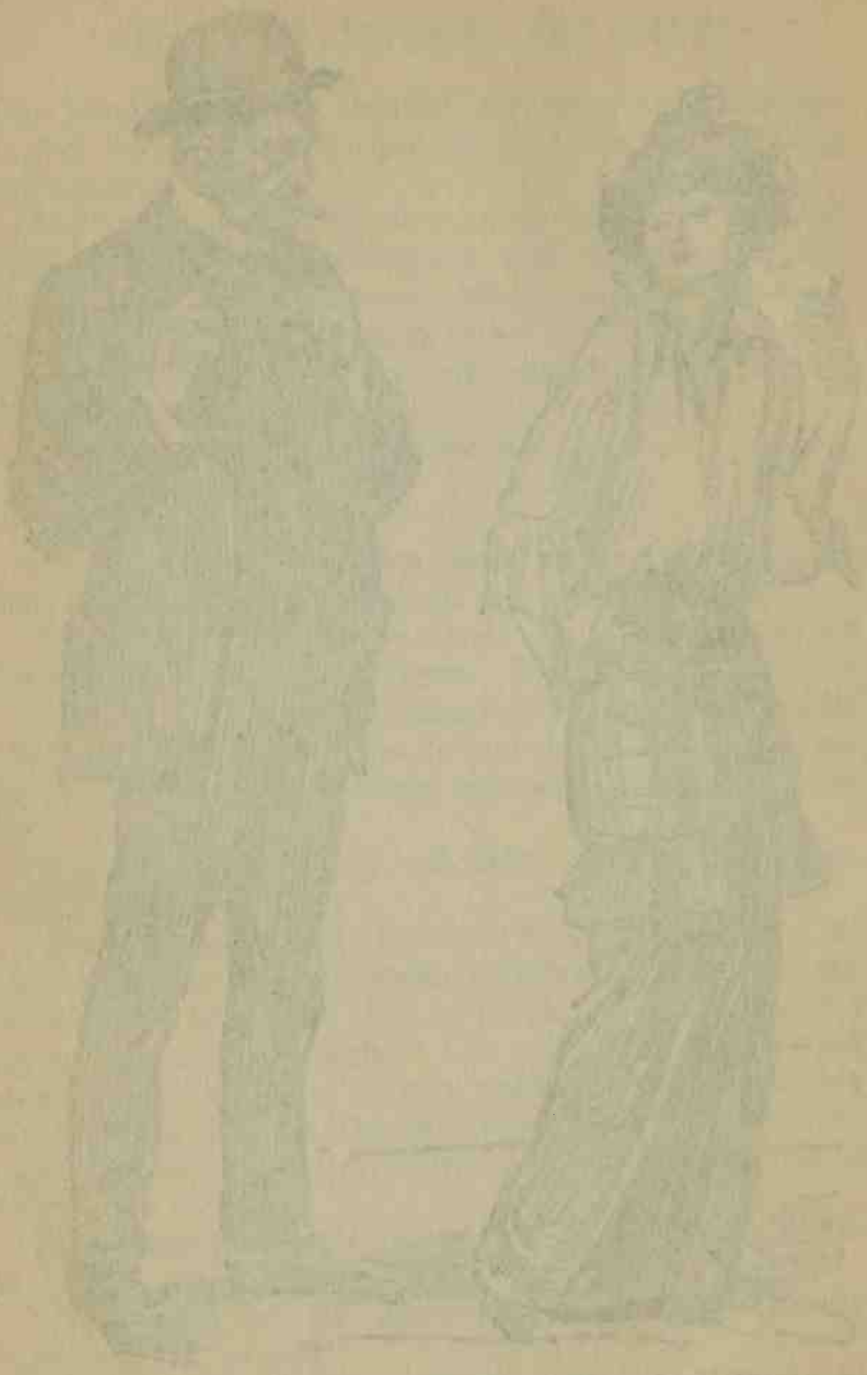
"But—what for? I haven't done anything." Incensed at the fellow's total indifference, she ran on, fiercely: "I won't go. I'm no crook. You can't hustle me out like this. I'll fight. I've got friends and I've got money, and I'm going to stay right here. You haven't anything on me, for I haven't done anything. I'm behaving myself, and I'm clean. You can tell Inspector Snell so for me."

The policeman silently drew from his pocket an envelope, which he handed to her.

"Before you talk any louder suppose you give this the 'once over,'" he said.

Lilas glanced at the proffered package with a sneer. "Bah! Don't you think I know a warrant?" Then,

"YOUR orders is to leave town. Be out and away at eight o'clock; that's four hours. Understand?"



as she opened the envelope and scanned its contents, she started. To conceal the tremor of her hand she spread the documents upon her center-table and turned her back to the visitor. An odd rigidity crept over her. When she swung about to speak her voice was harsh, but her defiance had lessened.

"I don't understand—"

"Oh! I guess you do. Anyhow, the whole story's there. You see, Armistead spilled—that's why he jumped his bond; he was afraid of Melcher's gunmen. We got Sullivan, too. He was tough, but we got him finally; and as for Knight! Say, that little grafter sprained his wrist signing affidavits."

"Rot! You don't expect me to believe all this?" Lilas demanded, uncertainly. "Why, these confessions are probably phony. You dictated them yourself, for all I know. Anyhow, they don't mean anything to me."

"Well, you'd ought to know whether they do or not." The policeman calmly refolded the papers.

"What about Max? What does he say about this?"

"Oh, he takes it all right. He knows we've got it on him, and he knows when to lay down a hand. Max is a good sport. But I ain't here to swap gossip. If I was you I'd take it on the run; you can't win anything by sticking."

"I won't go," stormed the girl. "It's a put-up job to get me away."

"Have it your own way, but I'll be back at eight with a regular honest-to-goodness warrant." The officer nodded and walked out heavily.

When she was alone again Lilas felt as if her knees would give way. For the first time she realized that she had no single friend to whom she could turn or in whose assistance she could put faith. Before the plain-clothes man she had maintained a pretense of firmness, but it had been mere bravado, for in her soul she had known those documents to be authentic. Their contents proved

them so, and, now that the police knew all, resistance was plainly futile.

During her last talk with Bob Wharton Lilas had felt unbounded confidence in her ability to go through with her plans, come what might, but now the mere knowledge that those plans were known changed everything. In common with all evil-doers, Lilas entertained an exaggerated distrust of the law and a keen fear of its trickeries. The fact that she had been betrayed, the fact that she now had the open hostility of the police to combat, convinced her that the game was up.

As she pondered the situation anger at the treachery of her confederates grew and caused her to forget her own intended treachery to them. Even while she was defying the officer she had begun to reconcile herself to the idea of flight, and now she set about her preparations.

Four hours! Well, they had given her time enough. Much could be done in four hours. Eight o'clock would see her well out from under the shadow of the law. The Law! Lilas sneered as she reflected that the law invariably shielded the rich and prosperous while it oppressed the poor and the needy.

Of late her periods of independence from cocaine were becoming shorter and of less frequent occurrence, and before she had proceeded far with her packing she found herself badly in need of stimulation. Her resistance was running low, it seemed. That splendid recklessness which had sustained her when she flung her demand at Bob was entirely gone now; she was oddly nervous and unstrung, so she turned to the white powders.

Their effect was prompt and pleasant, as always; they enabled her to lay vigorous hold once more upon her scattered faculties. As she flung her belongings into her trunk her first black regrets and disappointments began to lighten, and she found herself looking at the matter more philosophically. After all, things were never quite

hopeless; she had played for big stakes and lost—through no fault of her own, but through the treachery of others. Well, this was not her first defeat, and certainly it would not be her last opportunity. She would pretend to yield; she would go away and wait. Yes, that was best. She could always return, and so long as her money lasted, so long as those blessed powders were available, she was assured of bodily and mental comfort at least. Meanwhile no one could rob her of her secret, and sometime, somehow it could be coined into money. Bob Wharton, John Merkle, the Hammon women, through their influence with the police, might exile her from New York, might hound her from place to place, but so long as she retained that secret they were all more or less in her power and could not deny her at least a comfortable living. She even smiled contemptuously as she looked back upon the way she had fooled Bob Wharton and the concern he had shown for Lorelei.

Then of a sudden Lilas awoke to the fact that she disliked—hated—Bob's wife. It seemed as if she had always hated her. Perhaps it was because of Lorelei's beauty or her superior ways, or—yes, because of her clean soul that nothing had been able to smirch. Character—what was it but hypocrisy, or a luxury upon which some people prided themselves? From Lorelei, Lilas's thoughts wandered naturally to Jim, thence to his companions, and finally to Max Melcher. One and all, those men, at the first hint of danger to themselves, had thrown her over and sought protection. That was manlike. It pleased her at this moment to call down punishments upon them and to imagine the forms those punishments would take if she possessed the power to inflict them. She owed those fellows something, and in particular she owed Max a grudge, for the whole scheme had been his.

The cocaine was working swiftly now; Lilas had

reached the stage of exaggerated self-regard; her enmity toward Melcher grew with unnatural rapidity. She had evened more than one score in the past, she mused, why not even this one? In Jarvis Hammon's case, for instance, she had taken the law into her own hands and had exacted payment for a wrong that most people would have considered dead to vengeance. Truly, that had been a revenge! For a long time the memory of that night's events had been almost intolerable: the picture of that dim-lit library, of the staring, stricken face of her victim had more than once filled Lilas with such horror that she had taken refuge in double doses of cocaine; but now, strangely enough, she felt no repugnance whatever in looking back upon it. On the contrary, she was thrilled by the remembrance and exulted in her act without restraint. She fancied at this moment that she could feel the cold contact of the revolver against her palm, the leap of the exploding weapon, the fierce triumph that had flamed through her when Hammon had halted in his tracks, then withered and crumpled as his wound took effect. That had been an instant worth all the pain and risk it cost! She lived again through the white heat of it, but it left her unsatisfied.

There were others who had wronged her and who deserved the same fate as Hammon—Max Melcher, for instance. Max had been her evil counselor in all things, he had always used her as a tool, and now, like a tool which he no longer had use for, he cast her aside.

Lilas found herself pacing the floor in a peculiar emotional frenzy. Outwardly she was cool, inwardly she was a prey to the wildest and wickedest passions.

It is by the use of cocaine that most of the hired assassins of the East Side prepare themselves to kill. Taken in sufficient quantities, the drug tends to produce a homicidal mania in the consumer, at the same time leaving him in supersensitive control of his faculties. Mind and body are

unnaturally stimulated by it. Whisky numbs a man's mind and makes his hands unsteady; cocaine not only crazes him, but lends him accuracy in shooting. Moreover, it deadens his sensibility, so that he goes on fighting even though riddled with wounds. Thus the use of this drug explains why the modern gunman is so deadly in his work and at the same time so difficult of capture, as it does the similar phenomena among the Southern negroes who, since they have been denied rum by state prohibition, have taken to cocaine.

Just how or when Lilas arrived at the determination to kill Max Melcher she did not know. The idea was there, full-grown and firmly fixed in her mind, when she discovered it. She began at once to shape its execution.

First she called Tony the Barber by 'phone, for now that the Metropolitan Club was closed she knew of no other way of discovering her victim's whereabouts. Max was not at the barber shop, she learned, but he would be there promptly at half past six o'clock for his shave. Yes, Tony declared, he always came there at that time; it was a habit of years' standing.

Lilas ordered her trunks sent down, paid her bill at the hotel, and then sought the nearest pawn shop. She had some difficulty in buying a revolver, but, succeeding at length, she returned to her room to arrange the final details of her plan.

That she had fixed upon Melcher rather than upon Bob or Merkle or some one else, can be explained only through the vagaries of a disordered mind, for, although the girl did not realize it, she was by this time quite out of her head. A desire as keen and as compelling as hunger clamored for Max's death, and it did not occur to her to resist it. Yet Lilas had no intention of sacrificing herself; much of the pleasure of the deed, she reflected, would result from a successful "get away," and therefore she craftily arranged her escape. She would drive to

Tony's, so ran her plan, tell her taxi-cab driver to wait, then enter the place quietly and swiftly. Max would be stretched out in one of the chairs and quite unaware of her approach until she bent over him; he would gain no hint of her design until he felt her weapon against his body. Such a simple mode of procedure could not fail, and—this ferocious longing to kill would be satisfied. In the confusion following the shot, Lilas reasoned, it would be easy to slip out of the place, step into her taxi and drive to the station. Once she was lost in that crowded place who could apprehend her? In half an hour she would be out of the state.

There still remained some time to wait and, to guard herself against a diminution of the drug's effect, she took another liberal dose. After a time this resulted in an added intensity of concentration, an even greater mental activity and strength of purpose. She felt equal to anything, afraid of nothing in heaven or earth.

For fear that Max might anticipate his regular time of arrival she again telephoned to Tony, but, learning that he had not done so, she gossiped briefly with the barber, discussing the raid on the Metropolitan, the misfortunes that had overtaken their mutual friends, and other topics of interest. She realized from Tony's laughter that she was talking with unusual wit and brilliance.

Her buoyancy was becoming a trifle oppressive now, so she rang off, and a few moments later discovered that her last inhalation of the drug was beginning to affect her heart. Before long its palpitation had become unpleasant, though not alarming as yet and probably no more than a passing phase. However, since ample time remained, she decided to lie down. The reclining position gave her some relief, but that odd, nightmarish overstimulation continued; in fact, it increased until it became almost unbearable. She closed her eyes only to behold a whirling confusion of shapes and visions. Gradually

her mind became peopled by distorted fancies. The moments crept on and the phantasmagoria continued. . . . Lilas realized at last that she was ill. She was confused, hysterical, wretched. She tried to rise, but failed. . . . She found herself swimming through space; blinding lights and choking vapors enveloped her. She noted with a dull sense of alarm that her heart was skipping; this frightened her into calling for help, but her voice sounded weak and unreal. . . . Everything was unreal; objects in the room were distorted and queer. . . . What was it that so terrified her? . . . Was it death?

CHAPTER XXVIII

LATE that night John Merkle telephoned Bob Wharton to say:

"Headquarters just rang me up and told me—prepare yourself for a shock—Lilas Lynn is dead."

"Dead?" Bob cried, in a startled voice. "Dead! How? When did it happen? I can't believe it."

Merkle made known the details that had come to him. "Looks like suicide, but they're not sure. Anyhow, she took too much dope of some sort. You can sleep easy now. I wish I could."

"I suppose it's the law of compensation."

"Compensation?" Merkle's voice sounded querulous. "There's no such thing. Don't talk to a Wall Street man about the law of compensation."

"Well, then, call it Providence."

"Providence has too much on its hands to bother with people like her. No, there is a certain—well, immovability about the conventional, and Lilas wasn't strong enough to topple it over."

"I—I'm shocked, of course, and yet I can't help feeling greatly relieved. Rotten thing to say—"

"Not at all. I'm delighted."

"Once I read about a flare-back on a battle-ship, and how a fellow threw himself into the door of the powder-magazine to prevent an explosion. That's me! I'm nearly scorched to death."

Bob's anxiety had been so intense of late that this unexpected solution of his difficulties seemed indeed

nothing less than a godsend. Lorelei, thank Heaven! had been saved from any knowledge of the affair, and when he went down to business it was with a lighter heart than he had felt for some time. Bob's acquaintance with Lilas Lynn had been far from pleasant; she had repaid his kindness with treachery, and now, although he was not a callous person, he could not pretend that his pity exceeded his relief. His regrets at the girl's tragic end were those which any normal man would have felt at the death of an acquaintance, but they were far overbalanced now by his joy at the fact that no further shadows menaced the peace of his wife and that once again the future was all dancing sunshine.

Bob had seldom been conscious of a deliberate effort to please himself, for to want a thing had always meant to have it almost before the desire had been recognized. The gratification of his impulses had become a sort of second nature to him, and now, feeling that he owed a debt of friendliness to the world, he was impelled to liquidate it.

He did struggle half-heartedly against his first drink, but after he had taken it and after other drinks had gone the way of the first he was troubled less and less by the consciousness of broken resolves. He met a number of people whom he liked and to whom he was inspired to show his liking, and, strange to say, the more he drank the more of such friends he discovered. By late afternoon he was in a fantastically jubilant mood, and, seizing Kurtz, he bore him across the way to Delmonico's.

Now, Kurtz was worldly and therefore tolerant. He had grown to like and to understand his young associate very well indeed, and something about Bob's riotous disposition to gladness awoke a response in the little tailor.

It was that expansive and expensive hour of the afternoon when business worries are dropped and before social cares are shouldered. It was cocktail-time along the

Avenue, the hour when sprees are born and engagements broken, and as it lengthened Wharton celebrated it as in days gone by. His last regret had vanished, he was having a splendid time, when a page called him to a telephone-booth.

Adorée's voice greeted him; she was speaking from his own home, and her first words almost sobered him. Something was wrong; Bob was needed quickly; Lorelei was asking for him. For more than an hour they had been vainly trying to locate him. They had succeeded in reaching the doctor, and he was there—with a nurse. Adorée's voice broke—probably it was nothing serious, but Lorelei was frightened and so was the speaker. Bob had better waste no time, for—one never could tell what might happen in cases of this sort.

When Bob lurched out of the booth he was white; the noisy group he had left rose in alarm at sight of his stricken face. His legs led him a crooked course out of the café, bringing him into collision with chairs and tables and causing him to realize for the first time how far he had allowed himself to go. In a shaking voice he called for a taxi-cab, meanwhile allowing the raw air of the street to cool his head.

But as he was hurried up the Avenue his fright grew until he lost himself in a dizzy, drunken panic. He tried to lay hold of himself, but his thoughts were as unruly as his legs had been. The significance of his conduct and its probable effect upon his wife filled him with horror. Fate had cunningly timed her punishment. Before long he began to attribute this catastrophe, whatever it might prove to be, directly to his own criminal behavior, and for once in his care-free life he knew the taste of bitter regret. But he could not think coherently; black fears were pouring in upon him with a speed to match the staggering objects that fled past his open cab window.

The terror of the unknown was upon him. What if Lorelei should die? Bob asked himself. A swing of the vehicle flung him into a corner, where he huddled, slack-jawed, staring. He was unable to shut out this last suggestion. If Lorelei died he would be her murderer, that was plain. He had wanted a child, to be sure, but until this moment he had never counted the risk nor realized what price might be exacted. No child could be worth a risk to Lorelei.

But regrets were unavailing. "Something had gone wrong," and Lorelei needed him. She was calling for him and he was drunk. He would reel up to her bed of pain with bleared eyes, with poisoned lips. How could he kiss her? How could be explain?

The cab swung into the curb, and he scrambled out, then stumbled blindly up the steps and into the building where he lived.

Adorée met him at his own door. Lorelei's summons had evidently found the dancer dressed for anything except such a crisis, for Miss Demorest was arrayed in the very newest importation. The lower half of her figure was startlingly suggestive of the harem, while above the waist she was adorned like a Chinese princess. A tango cap of gold crowned her swirls of hair, and from it depended a string of tremendous beads, looped beneath her chin. She presented a futurist combination of colors, mainly Mandarin yellow and royal blue, both of which in some peculiar way seemed to extend upward, tingeing her cheeks. But Wharton's impression was vague; he saw little more than the tragic widening of the girl's eyes as she recognized his condition.

"Am I as bad as that?" he stammered. "Do you think she'll notice it?"

"Oh, Bob!" Adorée cried, in a stricken voice. "How could you—at this time?"

"You said she wanted me. I couldn't take time—"

"Yes! She has been calling for you, but I'm sorry I found you."

A silent-footed figure in a nurse's uniform emerged from the dining-room, and her first expression of relief at sight of Bob changed swiftly to a stare of startled wonderment. Bob was not too drunk to read the half-spoken protest on her lips. Then he heard his wife calling him and realized that somehow she knew of his coming. At the sound of her voice, strangely throaty and hoarse from pain, the strength ran out of his body. The doctor heard him fumbling at the bedroom door and admitted him; then a low, aching cry of disappointment sounded, and Adorée Demorest bowed her head upon her arms.

When Bob groped his way back into the living-room his look was ghastly; his face was damp; his eyes were desperate.

"She sent me away," he whispered.

"Poor thing!" He winced at Adorée's tone. "God! I heard her when she saw you. I wonder if you realize—"

"Oh yes," he nodded, slowly. "I don't get drunk all over, like most men. I'm afraid I'll never forget that cry."

He was trembling, and his terror was so pitiful that Adorée laid a compassionate hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't let go, Bob. Hold your thoughts steady and sober up. We must all help."

"Tell me—you know about these things—tell me honestly—"

"What do I know about such things? What can I tell you?" bitterly cried the dancer. "I don't know anything about babies. I never even held one in my arms. I'm worse frightened than you are."

Darkness found Bob huddled in his chair fighting for his senses, but as the liquor died in him terrible fancies came to life. Those muffled cries of pain rising now and then terrorized him, and yet the long intervals of silence

between were worse, for then it seemed to him that the fight must be going against his wife and that her strength must be proving insufficient. There were times, too, when he felt the paralyzing conviction that he was alone in the house, and more than once he stole down the hall, his heart between his teeth, his body shaking in a palsy of apprehension.

A frightened maid began preparations for his dinner, but he ordered her away. Then when she brought him a tray, anger at the thought that his own comfort should be considered of consequence made him refuse to touch it.

At length his inactivity became unbearable, and, feeling the desperate need of sane counsel, he telephoned to John Merkle. Bob was too deeply agitated to more than note the banker's statement that Mr. and Mrs. Hannibal Wharton were in the city, but, recalling it later, he experienced a stab of regret that his mother was not here to comfort Lorelei in the first great crisis of her womanhood. It had been Lorelei's wish that her own mother be kept in ignorance of the truth, and now, therefore, the girl had no one to lean upon except an unpractical stage-woman —and a drunken husband. In Bob's mind the pity of it grew as the time crept on.

But Adorée Demorest was wonderful. Despite her inexperience she was calm, capable, sympathetic, and, best of all, her normality afforded a support upon which both the husband and the wife could rest. When she finally made herself ready for the street Bob cried piteously:

"You're not going to leave us?"

"I must. It's nearly theater-time," she told him. "It's one of the penalties of this business that nothing must hold the curtain; but I'll be back the minute the show is over."

"Lorelei needs you."

Adorée nodded; her eyes met Bob's squarely, and he saw that they were wet. Her face was tender, and in

spite of her grotesquely affected toilette she appeared very simple and womanly at this moment. Her absurd theatricalism was gone; she was a natural, unaffected young woman.

"I wish I could do something to help," wearily continued Bob, but Adorée shook her head so violently that the barbaric beaded festoon beneath her chin clicked and rattled.

"She knows you're close by; that's enough. This is a poor time to preach, but—it seems to me if you've got a bit of real manhood in you, Bob, you'll never drink again. The shock of seeing you like this—when she needed you—didn't help her any."

"I know! I know!" The words were wrung from him like a groan. "But the thing is bigger and stronger than I am. It takes both of us to fight it. If she should—leave me I'd never pull through and—I wouldn't want to."

Never until she left Lorelei's house and turned toward the white lights of Broadway did Adorée Demorest fully realize whither her theatrical career had carried her. Lorelei, it seemed to her now, had lived to high purpose; she was soon to be a mother. But as for herself—the dancer cringed at the thought. What had her life brought? Notoriety, shame! In the eyes of men she was abominable. She had sold herself for the satisfaction of seeing a false name blazoned in electric lights, while Lorelei had played the game differently and won. Yes, she would have won even though she died to-night. But how could a woman like Adorée Demorest, "The King's Favorite," "The Woman with the Rubies," hope for wifehood or for motherhood? The bitterness of these reflections lay in the fact that Adorée knew herself to be pure. But the world considered her evil, and evil in its eyes she would remain. How could she hope to bring anything but misery to a husband or bequeath anything but shame to a child?

At this moment she would gladly have changed places with that other girl whose life hung in the scales.

John Merkle had never lost interest in Lorelei, nor forgotten her refusal of his well-meant offer of assistance. From the night of their first meeting she had intrigued his interest, and her marriage to Bob had deepened his friendly feeling. Although he prided himself upon a reputation for harsh cynicism and cherished the conviction that he was wholly without sentiment, he was in reality more emotional than he believed, and Lorelei's courageous efforts to regenerate her husband, her vigorous determination to build respectability and happiness out of the unpromising materials at her hand, had excited his liveliest sympathy. It pleased him to read into her character beauties and nobilities of which she was utterly unconscious if not actually devoid. Now that she had come to a serious crisis Merkle's slowly growing resentment at Bob's parents for refusing to recognize her burst into anger. The result was that soon after his talk with Bob he telephoned Hannibal Wharton, making known the situation in the most disagreeable and biting manner of which he was capable. Strange to say, Wharton heard him through, then thanked him before ringing off.

When Hannibal had repeated the news to his wife she moved slowly to a window and stood there staring down into the glittering chasm of Fifth Avenue. Bob's mother was a frail, erect, impassive woman, wearied and saddened with the weight of her husband's millions. There had been a time when society knew her, but of late years she saw few people, and her name was seldom mentioned except in connection with her benefactions. Even the true satisfaction of giving had been denied her, since real charity means sacrifice. Wealth had lent her a painful conspicuousness and had made her a target for multifarious demands so insistent, so ill-considered, so

unworthy—many of them—that she had been forced into an isolation, more strict even than her husband's.

Great responsibilities had changed Hannibal Wharton into a machine; he had become mechanical even in his daily life, in his pleasures, in his relaxations. His suspicions and his dislikes were also more or less automatic, but in all his married life he had never found cause to complain of anything his wife had done. He was serenely conscious, moreover, of her complete accord with his every action, and now, therefore, in reporting Merkle's conversation he spoke musingly, as a man speaks to himself.

"John loves to be caustic; he likes to vocalize his dyspepsia," the old man muttered. "Well, if it's as serious as he seems to think, we may be spared the disgrace of a grandchild." Mrs. Wharton did not stir; there was something uncompromising in the rigid lines of her back and in her stiffly poised head. "People of her kind always have children," he continued, "and that's what I told Bob. I told him he was laying up trouble for himself."

"Bob had more to him than we thought," irrelevantly murmured the mother.

"More than we thought?" Hannibal shook his head. "Not more than *I* thought. I knew he had it in him; you were the one—"

"No, no! We both doubted. Perhaps this girl read him."

"Sure she read him!" snorted the father. "She read his bank-book. But I fooled her."

"Do you remember when Bob was born?"

"Eh?"

"Do you remember? I had trouble, too."

Into Hannibal's eyes came a slow and painful light of reminiscence.

"The doctors thought—"

THERE was a silence, then Hannibal looked up to find his wife standing over him.

"Of course I remember!" her husband broke in. "Those damned doctors said you'd never come through it."

"Yes; I wasn't strong."

"But you did. I was with you. I fought for you. I wouldn't let you die. Remember it?" The speaker moistened his lips. "Why, I never forgot."

"Bob is experiencing something like that to-night."

Hannibal started, then he fumbled uncertainly for a cigar. When he had it lighted he said, gruffly, "Well, it made a man of me; I hope it 'll help Bob."

Still staring out across the glowing lights and the mysterious, inky blots that lay below her, Mrs. Wharton went on: "You are thinking only of Bob, but that girl is suffering all I suffered that night, and I'm thinking of her, too. She is offering her life for the life of a little child, just as I offered mine."

There was a silence, then Hannibal looked up to find his wife standing over him with face strangely humble. Her eyes were appealing, her frail figure was shaking wretchedly.

"My dear!" he cried, rising.

"I can't keep it up, Hannibal. I can't pretend any longer. It's Bob's baby and it's ours—" Disregarding his denial, she ran on, swiftly: "I wanted more children, but I couldn't have them, so I've starved myself all these years. You can't understand, but I'm lonely, Hannibal, terribly lonely and sad. Bob grew up and went away, and all we had left was money. The dollars piled up; year by year they grew heavier and heavier until they squeezed our lives dry and crowded out everything. They even crowded out our son and—spoiled him. They made you into a stone man; they came between me and the people and the things I loved; they walled me off from the world. My life is empty—empty. I want to mother something."

Hannibal inquired, hoarsely: "Not this baby, surely? Not that woman's child?"

"It's Bob's baby and ours."

He looked down at her queerly for a moment. "The breed is rotten. If he had married a decent girl—"

"John Merkle says she is splendid."

"How do you know?"

"I have talked with him. I have learned whatever I could about her, wherever I could, and it's all good. After all, Bob loves her, and isn't that enough?"

"But she doesn't love him," stormed the father. "She said she didn't. She wants his money, and she thinks she'll get it this way."

"Do you think money can pay her for what she is enduring at this minute? She's frightened, just as I was frightened when Bob was born. She's sick and suffering. But do you think all our dollars could buy that child from her? Money has made us hard, Hannibal; let's—be different."

"I'm afraid we have put it off too long," he answered, slowly. "She won't forgive us, and I'm not sure I want her to."

"Bob's in trouble. Won't you go to him?"

Hannibal Wharton opened his lips, closed them; then, taking his hat and coat, he left the room.

But as the old man went up-town his nerve failed him. He was fixed in his ways, he had a blind faith in his own infallibility. Twice he rode up in the elevator to his son's door, twice he rode down again. The hall-man informed him that the crisis had not passed, so, finding the night air not uncomfortable, Hannibal settled himself to wait. After all, he told himself, this was not the moment for a painful reconciliation.

As time dragged on he came to a reckoning with his conscience, and his meditations brought home the realization that despite his success, despite the love and companionship of his wife, he, too, was growing old and lonely.

THE AUCTION BLOCK

During the chill, still hours after the city had gone to rest an automobile drew up to the apartment house; when its expected passenger emerged from the building a grim-faced stranger in a greatcoat accosted him. One glance challenged the physician's attention, and he answered:

"Yes, it's all over. A boy."

"And—Mrs. Wharton, the mother?"

"Youth is a wonderful thing, and she has everything to live for. She is doing as well as could be expected. You're a relative, I presume?"

The old man hesitated, then his voice came boldly. "Yes, I'm her father."

When the doctor had driven away Hannibal strode into the building and telephoned to the Waldorf, but now his words were short and oddly broken. Nevertheless they brought a light of gladness to the eyes of the woman who had waited all these hours.

CHAPTER XXIX

ADORÉE DEMOREST, still in her glittering, hybrid costume, but heavy-limbed and dull with fatigue, paused outside her own door early that morning. The time lacked perhaps an hour of dawn, the street outside and the building itself was silent, yet from Adorée's parlor issued the sound of light fingers upon piano-keys. Adorée entered, to find Campbell Pope, with collar loosened and hair on end, seated at the instrument. The air within the room was blue and reeking with the odor of stale tobacco-smoke, and the ash-receiver at his elbow was piled high with burnt offerings, one of which was now sending an evil-smelling streamer toward the ceiling.

Pope rose at Adorée's entrance, eying her anxiously. "Is everything all right?" he cried.

"Is what all right?"

"The—er—Lorelei."

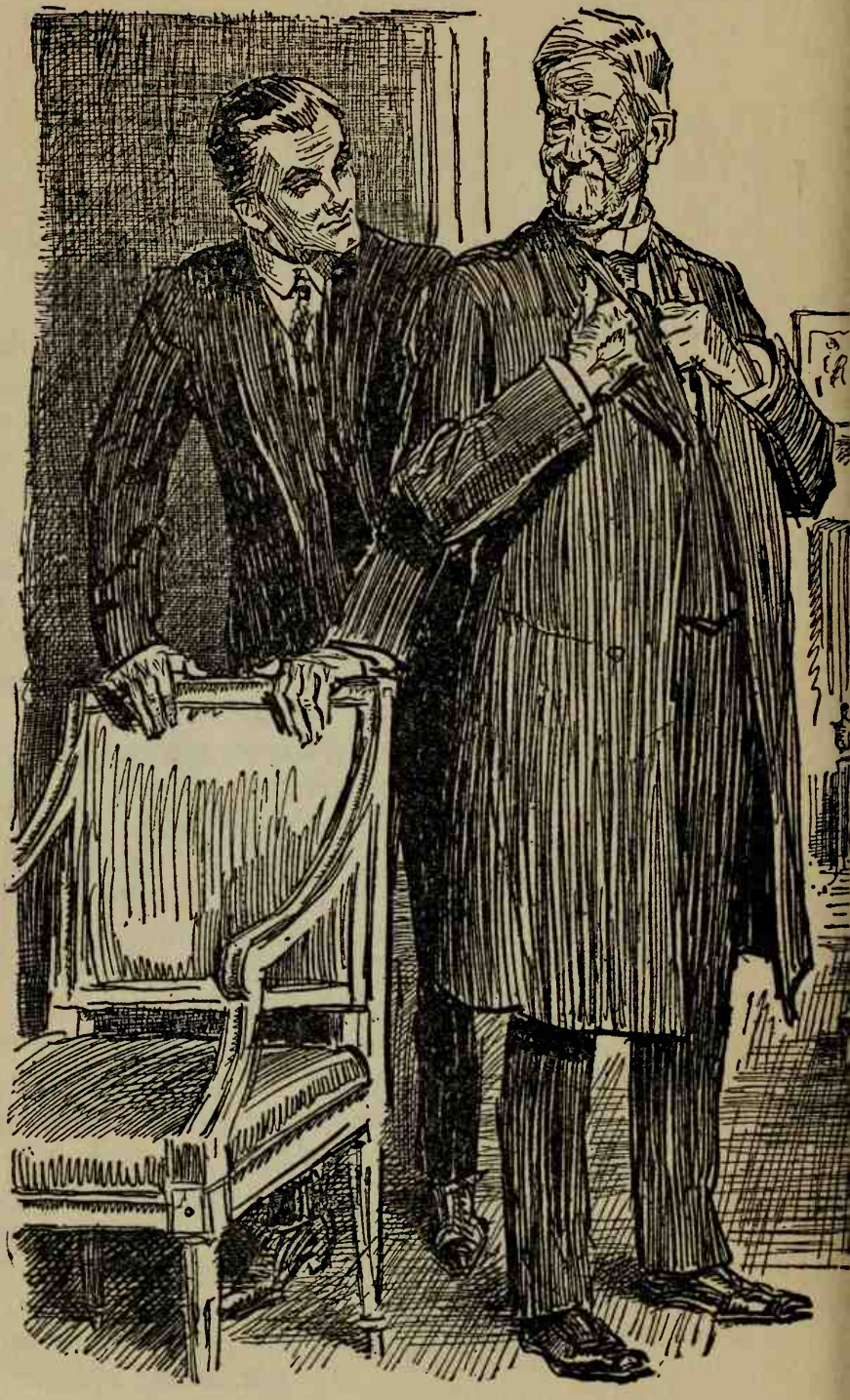
"Oh yes! What are you doing here?"

"I suppose I must apologize. You see, I heard the news and came here after the show. When I learned where you were I decided to wait and—and help."

"You decided to—help?" Adorée eyed the disheveled musician queerly. "By smelling up my parlor and playing my poor piano all night—is that how you help? What do you mean, 'help'?"

The critic appeared to realize for the first time the lateness of the hour. Glancing at his watch, he gasped:

"Why, I had no idea it was this time. I've been here all night, haven't I? You see, after I got in I was afraid to go out without explaining."



"Why, she reformed me from the ground up

I've sworn off every blessed thing I used to do."

"What do you mean by saying you wanted to 'help'?" Miss Demorest repeated, curiously. "You've helped to break my lease—I'll be thrown out of this house sure."

Pope stammered, guiltily, "I was playing for Bob and Lorelei."

With one glove half off Adorée slowly seated herself, showing in her face an amazement that increased the man's embarrassment.

"I knew it was a serious matter," he explained, "and, being terribly fond of Bob and Lorelei, I naturally wanted to do what I could."

"Yes, go on."

Pope took a deeper breath, then burst out:

"Oh, I have a sixty-horse-power imagination, and it seems to me that music is a sort of—prayer; anyhow it's the only way I know of praying. Good music is divine language; it's what the angels speak, if there are any angels. Sometimes it seems to me that I can soar heavenward on the wings of—of melody and get close enough to make myself heard. In my own way I was sort of praying for those two children. Foolish, isn't it? I'm sorry I told you. It sounds nutty to me when I stop to consider it." Pope stirred uneasily under Adorée's gravely speculative eyes. "Lorelei's all right?"

Adorée nodded. "It's a boy." There was a moment of silence. "Did you ever see a brand-new baby?"

"Lord, no!"

Miss Demorest's gaze remained bent upon Pope, but it was focused upon great distances; her voice when she spoke was hushed and awe-stricken. "Neither did I until this one. I held it! I held it in my arms. Oh—I was frightened, and yet I seemed to know just what to do and—and everything. It was strange. It hurt me terribly, for, you see, I didn't know what babies meant until to-night. Now I know."

Pope saw the shining eyes suddenly fill and threaten

to overflow; instead of the grotesquely overdressed and artificial stage favorite he beheld only a yearning woman whose face was softened and glorified as by a vision.

"Poor Lorelei!" he murmured, at a loss for words.

"Poor Lorelei?" Adorée's lips twisted mirthlessly. "Of course you don't understand. How could you? Why, it's *her* baby. She's a mother. I can hold it once in a while; she can hold it always."

"I didn't know you cared for children."

Adorée shrugged; the beads at her throat clicked barbarously. "Neither did I, but I suppose every woman does if she only knew it. To-night I began to understand what this ache inside of me means." Her gaze came back and centered upon his face, but it was frightened and panic-stricken now. "I've sacrificed my right to children."

"How can you say—"

"Oh, you know it as well as I do!" A flush wavered in the speaker's cheeks, then fled, leaving her white and weary. "You, of all men, must understand. I'm notorious. I'm a painted woman, a wicked woman—the wickedest woman in the land—and that reputation will live in spite of anything I can do." She began to cry now in a way strange to Pope's experience, for her tears appeared, grew, and spilled themselves slowly down her cheeks, and she made no attempt to hide them. The sight depressed him dreadfully, for at heart he was intensely sentimental. "I didn't know what it means to be notorious," she stated, tensely. "I didn't know what I was doing when I agreed to be 'Adorée Demorest.'"

Pope's habitual restraint all at once gave way. "Nonsense!" he exploded. "The thing that counts is what you are, not what you seem to be. I know the truth; I don't give a damn what people say."

Now there was nothing sufficiently significant about these words to bring a light of wonderment and gladness

to the girl's face, but her tears ceased as abruptly as they had commenced, and, noting the slowly growing radiance of her expression, Campbell was stricken dumb with fright at the possible consequences of temerity. The knowledge of his shortcomings robbed him of confidence and helped to confuse him.

Adorée rose, she removed her tango cap and the mantle elaborately draped from one shoulder that served as an evening wrap, then with a lingering backward glance she disappeared into her chamber. She bathed her eyes, powdered her cheeks, patted her hair into more becoming fashion, gave a final dab of the puff upon her nose, as an expert billiard-player chalks his cue. When she had quite finished she returned to the critic, who meanwhile had remained frozen in his tracks. For a moment she stood looking up at him with a peculiar, tender smile, then took him by the lapels of his shapeless coat and drew his thin face down to hers.

"I'm not going to let you back out," she declared, firmly. "You asked me, didn't you?"

"Adorée! No, no! Think what you are doing," he cried, sharply.

But she continued to smile up into his eyes with a gladness that intoxicated him.

She snuggled closer to him, murmuring, cozily: "I don't want to think—we'll have plenty of time to think when we're too old to talk. Now, I just want to love you as hard as you have been loving me for the last six months."

During the days of Lorelei's recovery Bob Wharton was in a peculiarly exultant mood. Her ready forgiveness of his behavior did much to renew his faith in himself, besides doubling his devotion to her. He did not feel that he could ever learn to love her any more than he did, for at times the strength of his passion frightened him, but

her allowance for his weakness brought them into closer touch with each other and kindled in him an aching humility that craved self-sacrifice. Dwarfing these and kindred emotions, however, was a feeling altogether new which had come with the birth of his son. At first the baby awed and frightened Bob, it oppressed him with a sense of tremendous responsibility, but on the heels of this came a dawning pride and then an insatiable curiosity. He began to spend a great deal of time with the infant; he studied it, he stared at it, when no one was looking he felt of the little fellow gingerly, and would have enjoyed examining it minutely had he dared. His hands itched for it, and its weak, strangling gurgles sent indescribable thrills through him. The easy dexterity with which the nurse handled it—as if the precious atom were a bundle of rags—excited Bob's liveliest apprehension, and at such times he hovered near by, poised upon tiptoe for fear she might drop it. He felt that it should be borne on silken cushions while heads were bowed and backs bent rather than upon the hip or in the crook of a careless elbow. When he ventured to voice this feeling to his wife he was offended at her amusement, and for a whole day tortured himself with the suspicion that the child's mother did not truly love it.

To all young fathers there comes a certain readjustment of values. To Bob, who had always led a selfish, thoughtless existence, it was at first bewildering to discover that his place at the head of his household had been usurped by another. Heretofore he had always been of supreme domestic importance, but now the order of things was completely reversed, if not hopelessly jumbled. First in consequence came this new person, tiny and vastly tyrannical because of its helplessness, then the nurse, an awesome person—a sort of oracle and regent combined—who ruled in the name and stead of the new heir. Nurse's wisdom was unbounded, her lightest wish was law, and

next to her in authority was a fat, bearded prime minister who daily came and went in an automobile and who wrote edicts on a little pad. This person's frown threw the entire establishment into confusion. Lorelei herself occupied no mean station in the new scheme, for at least she shared the confidence of the nurse and the doctor, and ranked above the cook and the housemaid, but not so Bob. Somewhere at the foot of the list he found his own true place.

Now, strange to say, this novel arrangement was extremely agreeable to the deposed ruler. Bob took a shameless delight in doing menial service; to fetch and to carry for all hands filled him with joy. But once outside of the premises he reasserted himself, and his importance grew as gas expands; he swelled to the bursting-point, he strutted, he grinned, he was broadly tolerant, and more than once he startled total strangers by laughing hilariously at nothing. When he could not talk he whistled in tune to the singing voices within him. But it was seldom indeed that he could not talk, and before long his intimate friends began to avoid him like a plague. It was his partner, Kurtz, who finally dubbed him "The Pestilence that talketh in darkness and the Destruction that wasteth our noondays."

Scarcely less interested in the new baby was Campbell Pope. Pope, in fact, was becoming interested in almost everything of late. He was growing youthful, too, in a way that vaguely alarmed his acquaintances. His cynicism was disappearing, his dramatic reviews began to assume a commendatory tone that all but destroyed their journalistic value.

When Lorelei had recovered sufficiently to receive visitors the two lovers appeared one afternoon laden with packages.

"We've been shopping for the baby," Adorée explained, as she began to unload herself; and Pope announced en-

thusiastically that the experience had been the most exciting of an adventurous lifetime. Both of them, it seemed, had given free rein to their extravagance, for to begin with there was a marvelous locomotive that ran on a circular track, slightly too large to fit any room in the apartment. It was no ordinary tin toy; it had a bell that rang and a whistle that tooted and a queer little painted manikin inside the cab. There were, moreover, a depot, a bridge, and a frowning mountain range pierced by a tunnel. All in all, the outfit weighed perhaps sixty pounds and required the operating skill of a practical mechanic.

And it proved to be a dangerous plaything, too, for once it had been thoroughly wound up and set in motion it developed an unsuspected and terrifying energy. Bob subdued it only after it had completed a speed trial down the hall, in the course of which it substantially damaged baseboard and plaster.

Pope's taste ran to mechanical contrivances; among his contributions there were, in addition to this public nuisance, an automobile, a camera, a bowling-alley, and a set of small carpenter's tools, the mere sight of which brought out a sweat of apprehension upon the baby's father. Adorée, on the other hand, had invested heavily in animals; her gifts included a roaring lion, a peacock with a lease-breaking voice, an elephant that walked, accompanied by strange, whirring, abdominal sounds, besides many other products of the toy-makers' fancy. There was a huge doll which Miss Demorest had purchased because of its resemblance to herself and which was promptly christened "Aunt Adorée"; there were an ermine coat and a toy theater, also a full morocco set of *Lives of Famous Musicians*, in six volumes, this being an afterthought of Pope's, who feared the effects of Bob's low musical tastes upon a tender child. In addition to all these there was an elaborate enameled baby's bed with garlands of bisque flowers and a *point*

d'esprit canopy. This Adorée's sad-faced footman had held upon the front of the automobile during an embarrassing trip up Fifth Avenue and Riverside Drive.

During the examination of these interesting objects the lovers made known their happiness; then, after the customary felicitations, Adorée explained: "Everything is arranged. We are going to be quietly married at once—I'm afraid he'll get away from me if I put it off—"

"Not a chance!" Pope's sallow face colored happily.

"As soon as I finish my theatrical contract," Adorée ran on, "we are going to drop quietly out of sight and stay out of sight."

"Going to live abroad?" Bob inquired.

"Worse!" Pope explained. "Long Island. We're going to raise ducks."

"Ducks!" Adorée echoed, beatifically. "Hundreds and thousands of ducks! Little ducks and big ducks, fuzzy ones and smooth ones. Campbell can write plays, and I'll wear kimonos and be comfortable. It's wonderful to think about, isn't it?"

Pope supplemented her eagerly. "I'm looking for a bungalow on salt-water, with a south exposure for the brooder-houses. Say! We're going to *live*. I tell you, Bob, there's money in ducks. I'm reading up on the subject. My dear fellow, do you realize that—" He swung into his pet subject so swiftly that Bob could not head him off and was forced to listen somewhat dazedly.

Lorelei reached forth and drew Adorée down to her, whispering: "I'm so glad, dear. I knew he would end by loving you, for everybody does."

Pope concluded a lengthy harangue by saying: "My mistake last year was in the food. Ducks need soft food."

"Listen!" Bob raised a hand and nodded in the direction of the girls. "They're discussing that very subject."

"Top milk, indeed!" Adorée was crying, indignantly.

"Ours will have cream when they want it, and lots of it, too."

"My dear! It will be fatal." Lorelei was horrified. "Use nothing but top milk and barley-water. Be sure to sterilize the bottles and soak the nipples in borax—"

"Say!" Campbell Pope flushed painfully and rose to his feet. "They're not talking ducks. Women haven't the least delicacy, have they? Let's go out and smoke."

One day, after Bob had acquired sufficient confidence in himself and in the baby to handle it without anxiety to the nurse, he begged permission to show it to the hall-man down-stairs. He returned greatly elated, explaining that the attendant, who had some impossible number of babies of his own and might therefore be considered an authority, declared this one to be the finest he had ever beheld. Oddly enough, this praise delighted Bob out of all reason. He remained in a state of suppressed excitement all that day, and on the following afternoon he again kidnapped the child for a second exhibition. It seemed that the infant's fame spread rapidly, for soon the tenants of neighboring apartments began to clamor for a sight of it, and Bob was only too eager to gratify them. Every afternoon he took his son down-stairs with him, until finally Lorelei checked him as he was going out.

"Bob, dear," she said, with the faintest shadow of a smile. "I don't think it's good for him to go out so often. Why don't you ask your father and mother to come up?"

Wharton flushed, then he stammered, "I—what makes you—er—think—"

"Why, I guessed it the very first day." Lorelei's smile saddened. "They needn't see me, you know."

Bob laid the child back in its bed. "But that's just what they want. They want to see you, only I wouldn't let you be bothered. They're perfectly foolish over the

LORELEI reached forth and drew Adorée down to her, whispering: "I'm so glad, dear. I knew he would end by loving you, for everybody does."

kid; mother cries, and father—but just wait." He rushed out of the room, and in a few moments returned with his parents.

Hannibal Wharton was deeply embarrassed, but his wife went straight to Lorelei and, bending over her chair, placed a kiss upon her lips. "There," said she. "When you are stronger I'm going to apologize for the way we've treated you. We're old people. We're selfish and suspicious and unreasonable, but we're not entirely inhuman. You won't be too hard on us, will you?"

The old lady's eyes were shining, the palms which were clasped over Lorelei's hand were hot and tremulous. The look of hungry yearning that greeted the elder woman's words was ample answer, and with a little choking cry she gathered the weak figure into her arms and thrilled as she felt the amber head upon her breast.

Hannibal trumpeted into his handkerchief, then cleared his throat premonitorily, but Bob forestalled him with a happy laugh. "Don't hold any post-mortems, dad. Lorelei knows everything you intend to say."

"I'm blamed if she does," rumbled the old man, "because I don't know myself. I'm not much on apologies; I can take 'em, but I can't make 'em." His voice rose sternly: "Young lady, the night that baby was born I stood outside this house for hours because I was afraid to come in. And my feet hurt like the devil, too. I wouldn't lose that much sleep for the whole Steel Trust; but I didn't dare go back to the hotel, for mother was waiting, and I was afraid of her, too. I don't intend to go through another night like that."

Bob's mother turned to her son, saying: "She *is* beautiful, and she is good, too. Anybody can see that. We could love her for what she has done for you, if for nothing else."

"Well, I should say so," proudly vaunted the son. "She took a chance when she didn't care for me, and she

made me into a regular fellow. Why, she reformed me from the ground up. I've sworn off every blessed thing I used to do."

"Including drinking?" gruffly queried the father.

"Yes."

Lorelei smiled her slow, reluctant smile at the visitors, and her voice was gentle as she said: "He thinks he has, but it's hard to stop entirely, and you mustn't blame him if he forgets himself occasionally. You see, drinking is mostly a matter of temperament, after all. But he is doing splendidly, and some day perhaps—"

They nodded understandingly.

"You'll try to like us, won't you, for Bob's sake?" pleaded the old lady, timidly.

"I intend to love you both very dearly," shyly returned the girl, and, noting the light in Lorelei's face, Bob Wharton was satisfied.

Restraint vanished swiftly under the old couple's evident determination to make amends, but after they had gone Lorelei became so pensive that Bob said, anxiously, "I hope you weren't polite to them merely for my sake."

Lorelei shook her head. "No. I was only thinking—Do you realize that none of my own people have been to see me? That I haven't had a single word from any of them?"

Bob stirred uncomfortably; he started to speak, then checked himself as she went on, not without some effort: "I'm going to say something unpleasant, but I think you ought to know it. When they learn that your parents have taken me in and made up with us they're going to ask me for money. It's a terrible thing to say, but it's true."

"Do you want to see them? Do you want them to see the baby?"

"N-no!" Lorelei was pale as she made answer. "Not after all that has passed."

Bob heaved a grateful sigh. "I'm glad. They won't trouble you any more."

"Why? What—"

"I've been waiting until you were strong to tell you. I've noticed how their silence hurt you, but—it's my fault that they haven't been here. I sent them away."

"*You* sent them away?"

"Yes. I fixed them with money and—they're happy at last. There's considerable to tell. Jim got into trouble with the police and finally sent for me. He told me everything and—it wasn't pretty; I'd rather not repeat all he said, but it opened my eyes and showed me why they brought you here, how they put you on the auction block, and how they cried for bids. He told me things you know nothing about and could never guess. When he had finished I thanked God that they had flung you into my arms instead of—some other man's. It's a miracle that you weren't sacrificed utterly."

"Where is Jim now?"

"Somewhere in the boundless West. He gave me his promise to reform."

"He never will."

"Of course not, and I don't expect it of him. You see, I know how hard it is to reform."

"But mother and father?"

"I'm coming to them. My dad came around the day after our baby was born and shook hands. He wanted to stamp right in here and tell you what a fool he had made of himself, but I wouldn't stand for it. Finally, when he saw the kid, he blew up entirely, and right away proposed breaking ground for a jasper palace for the youngster. He wanted to build it in Pittsburg where he could run in, going to and from business. Mother was just as foolish, too. Well, when I had had my little understanding with Jim and learned the whole truth about your people I realized that no matter where we went

they would be a constant menace to our happiness unless they were provided for. It struck me that you had made a game fight for happiness, and I couldn't stand for anything to spoil it at the last minute. I went to mother and told her the facts, and she seemed to understand as well as I how you must feel in spite of all they had done, so we shook down the governor for an endowment."

"Bob! What do you mean?" Lorelei faltered in bewilderment.

"We asked him for a hundred thousand dollars and got it."

Lorelei gasped.

"He bellowed like a bull, he spat poison like a cobra, he writhed like a bucket of eels, but we put it over."

"A hundred thousand dollars!" whispered the wife.

"To a penny. And it's in the bank to your credit. But I didn't stop there." Bob's voice hardened. "I went to your mother and in your name I promised her the income from it so long, and only so long, as she and Peter stayed away from you. She accepted—rather greedily, I thought—and they have gone back to Vale. They have your old house, and I have their promise never to see you except upon your invitation. Of course you can go to them whenever you wish, but—they're happy, and I think we will be happier with them in Vale than in New York. I hope you don't object to my arrangement."

There was a long silence, then Lorelei sighed. "You are a very good man, Bob. It was my dream to do something of this sort, but I could never have done it so well."

Her husband bent and kissed her tenderly. "It wasn't all my doings; I had help. And you mustn't feel sad, for something tells me you're going to learn finally the meaning of a real mother's love."

"Yes—yes!" The answer came dreamily, then as a fretful complaint issued from the crib at her side Lorelei

leaned forward and swiftly gathered the baby into her arms.

"Is he sick?" Bob questioned, in alarm.

"No, silly. He's only hungry."

There in the gathering dusk Bob Wharton looked on at a sight that never failed to thrill him strangely. In his wife's face was a beautiful content, and it seemed to him fitting indeed that this country girl who had come to the city in quest of Life should end her search thus, with a baby at her breast.

THE END

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